The Clans

By: Alex1

Michelangelo will do anything to save a sick brother- including striking a dangerous deal with a cunning enemy. But it turns out there are more shady things going on here, and the Turtles soon find themselves fighting for their own survival as they are drawn further into the crossfires of a ninja clan war. This sequel to Terms of Allegiance is complete.

Status: complete

Published: 2012-04-05

Updated: 2012-05-24

Words: 67066

Chapters: 34

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Suspense - Reviews: 58 - Favs: 33 - Follows: 7

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7993335/1/The-Clans

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

The Clans

Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34

Chapter 1

Description: With the Foot rebuilding and the Rising Hand expanding, the turtles find themselves in conflict as well as uneasy alliance with both ninja clans, forcing them to make wrenching decisions as they fight to preserve their own honor and survival.

Genre: Action/Drama

Rating: T for language and violence

Disclaimer: The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are creations of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird and are owned by Nickelodeon.

Author's Foreword: *The Clans* is a sequel to *Terms of Allegiance* (which you can find by navigating to my profile page or searching this site). I *highly* recommend reading that first; this story will make a lot more sense if you do.

Other Info: This novel is complete. As with all my fics, it takes place in a TMNT world mostly in line with the Mirage/First Movie universe. I really appreciate reviews - please take a couple of minutes to leave me one, it really helps to know that someone is reading. Enjoy.

Chapter 1

"Can we go yet?" Raphael asked.

"Almost. I've pulled out a couple of thermostats I can try using, but I want to get an evaporator fan too in case that's the problem." Donatello cast a quick glance around the corner of the refrigerator he was disassembling. Raphael was sitting on top of one of the three "1-800-GOT-JUNK" trucks parked several yards away, his legs hanging off the side of the cab, his heels tapping a dull beat on the driver side window. Even from a distance, his boredom was palpable.

Donatello turned his attention back to the inside of the fridge. It was one of a handful standing together awaiting recycling or disposal. *People throw away perfectly good stuff,* Don thought as he unscrewed the part he was looking for. Nearby, a roll of carpet sat propped against an old water heater, and a stack of sheet metal lay piled next to a large box filled with computer parts. He was tempted to browse, but resolved to limit himself to what he'd come for. He didn't want his impatient companion to ditch the excursion in search of greater excitement.

When he'd told Leonardo earlier that afternoon that he was going to find replacement parts for their dying refrigerator, his brother's response had been quick: "Great. And take Raph with you." The time that Raphael had spent recuperating from poison, surgery and injury was wearing on him, and, like a feral cat in a house, he exuded twitchy restlessness from every pore. No wonder Leo had jumped at the chance to have him out of the lair for the night. But in a low voice, he'd added, "Take it easy," to Don just before they'd left.

Don placed the parts he'd gathered into his backpack. He screwed the back panel of the fridge back on, scuffed flat the gravel he'd disturbed, and hoisted the bag onto his shoulder. "Okay, all done," he called. Raph hopped off the truck and the two of them scaled the chain link fence and dropped to the pavement on the other side of the junk depot.

The first leg of their convoluted route home involved catching the B line subway. They descended into the tunnels via a service duct and flattened themselves against the side of the concrete wall as the train roared past just inches from them before pulling into the station. As the doors began to slide shut behind the embarking passengers, they sprinted to catch the end car and hung on, rocketing breathlessly through the muggy darkness. As soon as the train pulled into the next station, they slipped off and navigated the service routes back up to street level, emerging into the humid summer air that clung tenaciously to the city like a damp, pungent blanket. They picked up their pace, racing against the first light of

dawn. Conversation was sporadic, interspersed with long, comfortable silences.

"So what else you got going on?" Raph began after one such lull. "Besides fixing all the stuff we break."

"This and that," Donatello replied with a shrug. "Remember how last year I built that voice modulator for Mike as a gag gift and he thought it was hysterical?"

"How could I forget," Raph muttered.

"Well it quit a while ago and he wants me to make a new one."

"Christ, no. I will hurt you."

Don chuckled. "The more important project is figuring out how I can adjust the ultrasonic motion detector in the east tunnel so that they it doesn't go off every time a rat goes by." He was lost in thought for a minute. "I can't figure it out. I'm sure I calibrated it the same way as the one in the west tunnel and that one works fine. I could go back to a passive infrared system, but the ultrasonic has such better coverage, I hate to give up on it."

He stopped, figuring that he'd reached the extent of his listener's interest, but when he glanced up he was surprised to see Raphael still looking at him and paying attention, or at least valiantly trying to.

Something subtle had shifted between them this year. It wasn't because Don had saved Raph's life; that might be expected. It was that he'd set up and won such an outrageous gamble, and he'd gone around Leonardo to boot. That was worth major points in Raphael's book.

Or maybe my kidney is rubbing off on him, Don thought in amusement. Encouraged, he continued, "So I'm thinking maybe I could try installing a hybrid sensor that would be less prone to false triggering. But then I would have to order new parts..."

Raphael had definitely stopped listening now. But it wasn't just out of boredom; he was focused intently on something else, his gaze flickering all around the quiet side street they were walking through. "We're being tailed," he said.

Although he managed not to break stride, Donatello careened into battle alertness. It took no more than a couple of seconds to realize that Raphael was right. There was a man walking deep in the shadows on the other side of the street, staying slightly to the rear but keeping pace. Don couldn't see the second man directly behind them, but he could make out the steadily gaining footsteps.

Why now? he wondered, his spirits sinking even as his adrenaline rose. Ever since that dramatic day three months ago when the Rising Hand had dealt a major blow to the Foot, the streets had been seemingly devoid of ninja activity. He had allowed himself to hope that with the two clans regrouping against each other, his family would no longer be a target. So overly optimistic, he admitted now.

It did not help that his brother had a familiar anticipatory gleam in his eyes. Raphael before a fight was like a thoroughbred horse before a race: seconds away from being completely in his element, and barely able to stand it. "Alley on the left side," he said.

So much for taking it easy.

Perhaps sensing that they had been detected, the two men started running forward, nearly closing the gap just as the two turtles ducked into the gravel alleyway and pivoted about to face their pursuers, drawing weapons and falling into fighting stance.

The men came to a dead stop. One of them raised his arm in a signal.

A sniper. They leapt to either side as the whistle of the first arrow cut the air. It thudded into the ground between them, and half a dozen more followed suit, staking a neat line between the turtles and their opponents.

Barely missing a beat, Raphael vaulted over the row of upright arrow shafts, diving into the cover of the wall. To his angry surprise, both men turned and fled like jackrabbits into the shadows on either side of the street. "Why you little-" Raph cursed, pulling his arm back to hurl his sai between the nearest man's shoulder blades.

"Wait," Don grabbed his brother's wrist before the weapon could leave his hand. Raph spun and turned a confused glare on him as Don pointed to the first arrow that had hit the ground. It was too far off the mark to have been meant to kill. The shaft was bright red and there was a white cloth furled and tied around it.

Donatello dislodged the arrow and slipped the cloth off of it. It fell open, revealing the Japanese words written in black ink. He was out of practice reading kanji and it took him a few minutes, with Raphael scowling over his shoulder, to read it through, twice. "The Foot," he said.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Michelangelo turned up the volume on the old boom box. "Getting us psyched," he said, as the heavy hip-hop beat throbbed against the curved walls, and with a slick roll of his shoulders, he broke out into impromptu dance, slide-popping over to where Leonardo was bending over the hose that snaked down the tunnel, into their lair and onto the kitchen faucet.

"What're we at now? Seven?"

"Seven," Leo agreed. Sometimes, he thought with a smile, there really was a perfect solution. They had the unrelentingly hot weather to thank for upending what, with Raph and Don being out, might otherwise have been a quiet night, and instead spawning the unholy marriage of shuriken throwing practice (his idea) with water balloons (Mike's idea). Leonardo tied off one last balloon and added it to the pile Mike was gathering in his arms.

"Ready?" Mike called, when he'd backed several feet down the tunnel.

Leonardo rolled the palm-full of needle shuriken in his hand. "Ready."

Balloons began flying at him as fast as Mike could whip them. He nailed the first four- they burst in sprays of latex and water- the fifth one nearly got to him but he punched it out of the air, the sixth one hit him square in the chest and exploded, drenching him, and the seventh one bounced, jiggling, to the ground, because Mike was laughing too hard to throw straight.

Leo jumped on the wobbly yellow sphere and mimed beating it into submission. When he looked up, Donatello and Raphael were

standing there, looking far too serious. "Shuriken practice. You guys are missing out," he said, standing and wringing the water out of his mask. "Did you get what you were looking for?"

"We were attacked. Sort of." Donatello handed him a white cloth scroll. "Foot soldiers tailed us and shot this over on an arrow."

Sobered in an instant, Leonardo unrolled it, deciphering enough of the kanji to understand the message. Mike ran up, ready to pelt his freshly-returned siblings with water balloons, but stopped short when he saw Leo striding back into the lair, shutting off the boom box as he passed it.

"Sensei," Leonardo said, and Splinter, hearing his son's grave tone, turned off the television show he'd been watching as Leo handed over the cloth.

Mike studied the writing from behind Splinter's shoulder. "I stink at reading kanji. Is this... an invitation?"

"More like a summons," Don said. "The Foot want to meet, in two nights time."

"For tea and crumpets," Raphael added sarcastically, throwing himself into the nearest armchair with a scowl, his foul mood, no doubt, a result of being denied the fight he'd expected.

"What do you make of it, sensei?" Leonardo asked.

"It is... curious." Splinter said. "And vague. The formal wording suggests an occasion of importance, but it is not clear what for."

"Why not ignore it?" Mike said. "Pretty much every meeting we've ever had with the Foot has sucked, so odds are they're not throwing us a garden party."

Leo was re-reading, his eyes lingering on the red insignia of the Foot stamped at the bottom. "It does say our safety is guaranteed. Under

formal seal of the Clan."

"How kind," Raph scoffed.

"Maybe it's sincere," Don said. "Being at war against the Rising Hand, maybe they want to keep peace with us."

Leonardo looked questioningly at Splinter, who said, "While it is possible that this is a deception, it is against sacred code of honor for a ninja clan to break a sworn contract. It may be just as dangerous for us not to respond and thus be ignorant of their intentions."

Don said to Leo, "Two of us could go. That would cut down the risk."

Leo considered it, but shook his head. Better a unified showing than a half-strength party that would be interpreted as an insult to the credibility of the Clan seal. "We'll go together."

The Foot compound was under reconstruction. As the turtles neared it, they could see that the east side of the main building was mostly intact, although some parts, presumably fire damaged, were under repair, with plastic and scaffolding laid over them. The west side of the building was a hollow skeleton with beams and drywall being erected. Despite having laid vacant while the rubble was cleared, and even now, gutted as it was, the headquarters of the New York Foot Clan never failed to send icy tendrils of apprehension down Leonardo's neck.

Two Foot soldiers flanking the entry gate hastened to swing it open. Leonardo caught the slight, involuntary hesitation in his own stride as he led the way over the threshold.

It took immense willpower not to react, not to reach for his katana. He saw Michelangelo go pale, and Raphael's hands twitched for his sai before he closed them into fists.

The courtyard was filled with Foot soldiers. Silent and black-clad, they stood at attention in military-style rows, forming a corridor up to the main building. Every Foot ninja in the region must be gathered here; the assembly looked to be over two hundred strong. Not as many as there had once been during the reign of Oruku Saki, but plenty enough to intimidate.

A man stood on the short flight of steps leading up to the building's entrance. His hands were clasped behind his back as he surveyed the gathered ninja and the four mutant turtles now standing across from him. He was dressed in a formal, unadorned black kimono and his lined, weathered face was impassive.

The gate swung closed, leaving uneasy silence. Clearly, they were the final expected attendees. The man descended the steps and walked towards the turtles. When he reached them, he bowed in subdued but respectful greeting. " *Watashi no namae wa Kan Masataro desu."*

Leonardo waited a beat, then returned the bow. " *Leonardo desu.* " He indicated each of his brothers in turn. "Michelangelo. Raphael. Donatello."

"It is an honor to meet ninjas of such legendary repute," Kan Masatoro continued in Japanese. His voice, like his demeanor, was slow, firm and precise. He looked at them curiously, one by one, as if matching them with stories he'd been told. With a sweep of his arm he indicated the silent rows of ninja. "I have been appointed *jonin* of the American branch of the Foot. These are all the full ranking members." Turning back to them he said, "I appreciate your attendance. It is important that they see you here."

Raphael had no patience for niceties. " *Wareware wa koko de... de nani* - What are we doing here?" he demanded, aborting the attempt at Japanese.

The line of Leonardo's jaw stiffened at his brother's ill-mannered outburst, but Kan seemed unperturbed. In accented English he

replied, "Turning a new page."

As if on cue, the doors to the main building opened and a figure emerged into the glow of dusk. She was dressed in a pure white kimono that seemed to imbue her with a cold radiance. Her hair was pinned up elaborately, showing off her pale slender neck and the high cheekbones of her oval face. Though her eyes were hard, and she had the look of someone who'd aged a great deal in a short time, she still possessed an intimidating beauty.

"Karai," Leonardo breathed.

Unhurried, she advanced to the center of the courtyard. A woman in a black kimono trailed close behind her, carrying a tray. When she stood in the midst of the assembled onlookers, Karai turned slowly, surveying the Foot soldiers that until recently had been under her command. Her gaze fell upon the turtles and something in her serene expression changed, just for a second, but then she turned away and her words rang out so that even the most junior Foot soldiers in the back rows could hear her.

"The Foot Clan has been weakened," she declared in Japanese. "The serious defeat we suffered against our traitorous enemy occurred under my leadership. The disgrace is mine."

She knelt on the concrete pathway, carefully, as if to avoid marring the spotless white silk of her kimono.

Leonardo's eyes widened in alarm. He turned to Kan. " *Kore wa hitsuy ō arimasen,"* he insisted. This is not necessary.

" *Meiyo no k ō do nishitagau hitsuy ō ga arimasu,"* Kan replied.

"What did he say?" Mike whispered to Don.

"Something about the code of honor being obeyed," Don whispered back.

Karai's attendant came forward and laid the tray on the ground in front of her. On it lay a dagger with an ornately carved wooden hilt.

"My God, is she going to-" Mike started, but caught himself when he saw the grave warning look that Leonardo turned on him.

Karai exchanged a brief glance of understanding with Kan. She swept her gaze around the assembled onlookers and her eyes met Leonardo's. Acceptance, sadness, bitterness, regret... he wasn't sure what he saw. He stared steadily back, silently beseeching her, his head moving almost imperceptibly, *no* .

No. You shouldn't have to. You're not responsible.

Karai turned lastly to her attendant and gave her a small, grateful nod. The young woman had two silent tracks of tears on her face, the only thing at odds with her remarkable composure.

Karai fixed her eyes on a point far off in the smoggy New York skyline. In one unhesitating motion, she grasped the dagger and with a soft cry, plunged it deep into the left side of her abdomen.

There was a gasp; no one could tell from whom. With unfathomable strength of will, clutching the hilt of the dagger with both hands, Karai began pulling the blade across her body, left to right. Blood spread like a blossoming flower down the front of her kimono. A faint but horrible moan escaped her lips as she pitched forward slowly, as if falling through water.

Just before her forehead touched the ground, her attendant, her *kaishakunin,* moved. She lunged forward, drawing a katana from the scabbard that had been hidden in the folds of her robe. In less time than it took to blink, the blade completed its arc through Karai's neck. The head flopped forwards, still attached to the body by a thin layer of flesh.

For several seconds, no one moved. The courtyard was frozen in a state of macabre artistry; a sea of black with a single white and red

blot in the center. Leonardo heard himself swallow; the sound of it seemed unnaturally loud. He felt frozen, as rooted to the ground as a mountain underneath whose immovable surface molten lava was roiling. Mike looked sick. Donatello wore a revolted grimace, and even Raphael looked shocked. They had seen plenty of death before, but nothing like this, so chillingly ceremonial.

With a ritual flick of the blade, Karai's *kaishakunin* shed the blood from her katana and sheathed it. She knelt, head bowed, by the body of her mistress. Kan Masataro, the new leader of the Foot Clan, walked up the pathway and mounted the stairs where he had been standing when the turtles had first entered.

"Discipline. Secrecy. Honor." Each of Kan's words lingered over the assembled troops. "These traits define the ninja. Here in America, they are easily forgotten. Over-ambitious growth, personal ego, leniency, treason... these have been the reasons why the Clan has had missteps.

"We must return to our roots if we are to rebuild." He motioned towards the construction site behind him. "And we *will* rebuild. Our ways have survived for hundreds of years because we place Clan above all else. No one that acts for personal glory or revenge acts in the best interest of the Clan. My family line runs generations deep in the Foot. I stand here with one goal: to see the American branch of the Foot emerge stronger than ever."

He looked straight at the four turtles, and every one of the Foot soldiers followed his gaze. They were pinned under the eyes of two hundred ninja. It was hard to read expressions behind masks, but the crowd emitted wary hostility. Beneath his composure, Leonardo felt his skin crawl. Beside him, Raphael made a sound in his throat like a low growl.

"The Foot seek neither allies nor enemies." Kan said. He motioned for the compound gates to be opened. "But know that we will respect the former and destroy the latter."

As soon as they were below ground, Leonardo broke into a run. He set a bruising pace for his brothers to follow, akin to a hard training run. No one argued; they all needed to release tension from the ordeal. Up until the moment they'd cleared the gate, they'd half-expected to be set upon by a murderous mob of Foot. Two hundred against four.

In wordless agreement, Don and Mike fell back slightly, giving space for Leonardo's silent intensity to blaze its path through the subterranean tunnels. Only Raphael ran alongside him, not letting him pull ahead with his own thoughts, demanding a response with each stride he matched. If Raph felt any fatigue or weakness from his recent period of convalescence, he did not show it. Leonardo spared him only one glance, just before he dropped his pace as they turned the bend in the final stretch before home.

Splinter was waiting for them. He always had the same look of relief when they returned together, whether from a dangerous mission or from watching a movie at April's.

"Master," Leo said, with a quick bow. He hesitated, catching his breath, not sure where to begin. "Karai is dead."

"Seppuku?"

"Yes."

Splinter did not look surprised. "The new leader?"

"Kan Masataro. Sent from Japan. He seems… strong. Traditional."

"The name is familiar to me," Splinter said. "In the Foot Clan, the Kan family are well-known as master swordsmen."

Raphael straightened up from taking a drink of water straight from the kitchen faucet. "All that crazy shit- he wanted us there to watch. Why?"

"To leave no doubt that he's in charge," Don said. "And to make it clear that he's going to run things differently. Differently from Karai. Differently from the Shredder."

"Man, talk about stressful pop quiz in Japanese language comprehension." Mike dropped onto their beaten-up brown sofa, rubbing his temples. "It seemed like he was putting the ball into our court. And sending a message to his soldiers too. That rebuilding the Foot isn't about going after us."

"The Foot have a long history," Splinter said. He tugged on his whiskers thoughtfully. "It has changed a great deal, but it was once a venerable Clan."

Raphael made a contemptuous sound. "The Foot big shots in Japan can send some new guy over here to fix things, but no matter what speech he gives, the ninjas who were there tonight still hate us. You could *feel* it. It's not gonna be so easy for them to just change." He grabbed a towel and stalked off for the shower.

His brothers watched him go. "Yeah," Mike agreed under his breath. "Well, they're not the only ones."

Leonardo said nothing. The night's events hadn't sunken in yet; his mind kept replaying the same elegant and horrifying thirty seconds. After a minute, he went to his room, closing the door behind him. He felt culpable, in a vague but profound way. When he circled closer to the feeling, he could discern how everything he had done for the sake of his own family had been a link in the chain, one that ended in a dark crimson flower on white.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Summer lasted three more weeks before expiring in a final cleansing thunderstorm. In the month that followed, the temperature plunged and autumn seemed destined to be short. Michelangelo secretly welcomed the change, not just for the reprieve from the pungent and inescapable humidity below ground, but because life took on a more predictable and harmonious rhythm with the approach of cold weather. Chill rain and quieter city streets meant that Raphael roamed closer to home, often returning with needed supplies. Repairs and weatherproofing kept Donatello busy and away from his computers and gadgets. Everyone showed up for daily training. Splinter was always there, sometimes running the session, but other times sitting with a blanket on his lap, watching and commenting, missing nothing, but gradually shifting responsibility, as he had in other areas, to Leonardo.

There had been no further contact from the Foot.

That made it easier for Mike to push aside the unpleasant memory of that spectacle in the ninja compound and instead look forward to the coming days when, with the city under the grip of winter, they would sleep in, eat constantly, goof off, play games, surf the internet for funny videos and porn, watch stacks of action movies, and generally act like a quartet of bored male youths.

The boredom factor would be higher this year because April and Casey would be leaving right after Christmas and not returning until the end of January. An old college roommate of April's had gotten married and moved to Spain; they were finally taking her up on her offer to host them for an extended stay on the balmy Iberian peninsula.

"Are you sure I couldn't stow away in your luggage?" Mike asked again, flipping wistfully through the travel brochures lying on April's kitchen countertop. The trip was still two and a half months away but Casey had already begun to brag about beaches and sangria.

"You'd never get through airport security," April said.

"Hey, I might consider that a dare." He grinned at her rolled eyes.

"Here." She finished loading a small duffel bag with the groceries and blankets she'd asked him to pick up. Mike never ceased to wonder at how April could care for them in such minor, practical, and much-needed ways. "Be careful, there's a couple of glass jars in there."

"Thanks April, you rock." He hefted the bag, startled her by pretending to drop it, then slung it over his shoulder, threw her a wink and dropped out onto the fire escape stairs.

It was a cool but dry night and he decided to take the long way home, passing by one of his favorite people-watching spots. The rooftop of the second-hand comic book store overlooked a strip of bars and nightclubs, and on a Friday night, the sidewalks were crowded with sexily-clad young women and posturing young men lined up to get into their chosen nightspots.

Occasionally he came here with one of his brothers, to kill time on a slow night and rate the cleavage on display, but after a while it would grow tiresome, watching people going into unseen parties, as if they had lined up in the street with the rest of the crowd but could never make it past the bouncer. Even so, Mike still came here sometimes, just to enjoy the carefree energy of all those people, roughly his own age, moving in their packs, laughing and flirting, sometimes drunk or fighting, always talking, often about things he didn't understand, like college, work, the love affairs of themselves or their friends, the politics of their complex relationships. To amuse himself, he would imagine interjecting himself into their conversations.

No way, he replied to the two young men walking past beneath his perch. *Angelina Jolie is not hotter than Salma Hayek, even if she does get points for playing Lara Croft.*

To the blonde asking advice from her friend: *If she slept with your boyfriend, then yeah, you should un-friend her on Facebook, and no, you don't have to go to her birthday party.*

Guy coming out of the BMW: *Dude, I can smell your cologne from like, a block away!*

One teenager, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, struck him as familiar. Likely too young to even get into the clubs, he was standing off to the side with a tall, twenty-something friend, who Mike suspected he'd also seen before. The friend was talking, his lips clearly readable as he spoke to a third, unfamiliar young man.

"You don't have to be Japanese," he said, "as long as you've got the right skills. No ordinary street punks. The boss would have to meet you, see what you can do." He fished a card out of his pocket and handed it over. "You know where this is?"

Michelangelo was pretty good with faces. It took him a few minutes to place where he'd seen the two men before, but when he did, he was certain of it. He had fought them. Half a year ago, he'd knocked out the older one, and broken the teenager's wrist. A week later, he'd seen them again, entering the building where Mike and two of his brothers would first meet Saito Doshida. He trained his attention on the trio of men with sudden, intense interest.

The tall friend was giving directions to the address presumably written on the card. The man who'd received the card looked down at it. "How do you say this name?"

Mike couldn't quite lip-read the answer. Ageete? Ahgitay?

" *Agete* ," Leonardo said, four nights later, reading the discreet sign above the front doors of the two-story office building. "Rising Hand."

"Maybe it's just coincidence," Mike hedged. They were crouched in the shadow of a stone retaining wall across from the small empty parking lot. There was no sign of any activity. "They could be in the ornamental rock business."

"That would be agate," Don pointed out.

"Doshida's moved up in real estate." Raph squinted at the dark windows. "A lot better digs than the boathouse."

"We're not looking for trouble," Leo reminded him. "Just checking it out." He scanned the building and its grounds one more time, then signaled for them to move.

Splitting into pairs, they approached the building using the sparse cover on either side of the parking lot. There didn't seem to be much need for stealth; there wasn't a soul around. It took two minutes to scout the entire perimeter. The building had a total of three doors: the front entry, a side entry with a pass card reader, and an emergency fire exit at the back of the building. The large, fixed windows were tinted and mirrored and, with the ambient orange glow from the street, impossible to see through.

"Now what?" Mike asked.

Now they had a choice, Leo thought. They could break in, which might involve inflicting property damage or setting off an alarm, leaving evidence that they had been here. Or they could call it off, decide they didn't need to know.

Mike was exchanging signals with Donatello. "They're trying the roof," he said. They waited, keeping watch while Raphael established a climbing line. A few minutes later, they saw his figure on the roof, beckoning them up.

The three of them ascended quickly, Donatello holding his position as spotter until Mike and Leo were up, then climbing up himself. They gathered around the skylight that Raphael had discovered. It had a latch and a crank that allowed it to be opened for venting.

Leonardo's brothers looked at him expectantly as he deliberated, his eyes on the glass and the city sky reflected in its panes. Raphael frowned. After a moment, Leo nodded.

It took them working together carefully and patiently to unlatch, pry open and lift the skylight without damaging it. It was only a short drop onto the landing of a wide central stairwell. Leonardo went first and heard Raphael land softly next to him. They held motionless for several minutes, allowing their eyes to adjust to the extra darkness. There was no sign of anyone inside. No alarms went off. Still, they took up defensive point positions before signaling for Mike and Don to join them. Leo communicated in a couple quick signs for Raphael and Donatello to take the upper floor while he and Michelangelo swept the ground level.

They had barely begun to move when there was a sudden loud crackling from the building intercom. They all jumped, drawing their weapons as if to defend against the burst of static.

A voice came through over the speakers. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I suppose you'd like the tour?"

"Doshida," Leo said.

"Where are you, you bastard?" Raph shouted up at the ceiling.

"Go to the bottom of the stairs and take a left. There's an unmarked door next to the photocopier. You'll hear a buzzer when I unlock it."

The turtles exchanged wary glances, then did as instructed. When Raphael pushed open the door, they found themselves facing a set of stairs that descended underground into darkness.

"Yeah, right," Mike muttered.

"What's this about, Doshida?" Leo called. "Show yourself first."

There was a pause before Doshida's voice returned. "Always suspicious. As all good ninja are. Very well, wait there."

The loudspeaker fell silent. Minutes passed. Around them, hallways stretched out in either direction, flanked by rows of doors that presumably led into offices or conference rooms. A place like this was alien to them, and being watched and addressed by Doshida's disembodied voice only added to the discomfort.

A florescent light switched on somewhere near the bottom of the basement steps. A second later, Saito Doshida appeared and looked up the stairway. He probably could not see them in the darkness but he called up, "Come on then. You can see I'm alone."

Raphael shoved the door open fully and glared down at him. "What are you up to, Saito? You better not be messing with us."

"Have you forgotten that *you* just broke into *my* property?" Doshida's mouth curved in a thin smile. "You look well, Raphael. I see your health has improved."

Raphael bristled, but Doshida turned and started back the way he'd come, gesturing for them to follow. They did so cautiously, and found themselves walking down a long passageway. It appeared to have been recently constructed. Doshida's shoes clicked on unmarred tile, and the walls exuded the faint odor of new paint.

"This joins to another building," Donatello observed.

"Yes," Doshida replied without turning. When Raphael had last seen him, he had been a gaunt fugitive from the Foot. Tonight he was wearing tan slacks and a black polo shirt and looked like a Japanese businessman working late at the office. "The building back there only

holds some administrative functions and acts as a place to meet clients."

"You knew we were coming," Leo said.

"When the security system detected a breach in the skylight, I figured it was either you or the Foot. Personally, I'm pleased it's you." He seemed not in the least begrudging that their last encounter had involved Leonardo holding him at sword point and very nearly running him through.

The passageway ended in a set of stairs leading up to a large steel door. Doshida punched a code into a keypad, ran his hand over a fingerprint reader, and looked into a retina scanner. The door swung open into a gymnasium-sized space that, when Doshida flicked on the lights, appeared to be a hybrid between a ninja dojo and a military facility. A section of the room was set up with mats, sparring gear, and racks of ninja weapons and tools, with video cameras and big screen televisions on the walls above. Another side of the room was cordoned off with bulletproof glass and hung with silhouette cutouts for firearms practice. A set of metal gym lockers stood against the back wall.

"Get a load of this place," Mike remarked under his breath.

"One of our training rooms," Doshida said over his shoulder as he walked past it and down a hallway with doors marked, 'Blue 1', 'Green 3', and so on. The last room was a sizable office. With a color palette of rich, earthy reds and browns, modern furniture and Asian artwork, it was considerably more impressive than the one Leonardo, Donatello and Michelangelo had stormed into much earlier in the year.

"Have a seat." Doshida gestured to the leather sofa. "Anything to drink?" He opened up a mini-fridge behind his desk as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be hosting a quartet of mutant turtles in his office in the wee hours of the night.

Leonardo shook his head, ignoring both offers. "Why have you brought us here, Doshida?"

"Why did you break into my building?" Doshida poured himself a glass of sparkling mineral water. "No need to answer that. Of course, you couldn't resist. You want to know what I'm up to and what Agete is all about. After all-" he nodded to Raphael, "you're practically a co-founder."

"Yeah, where are my stock options?" The corner of Raphael's mouth turned up sarcastically as he took in Saito's office.

"Precisely what I want to discuss." He took a drink from his glass and sat on the front edge of his desk. "Agete is growing. The Foot may pull itself back together and give us trouble, but we've had a good head start. And we're getting work. Espionage, security, covert operations." He fixed them with a meaningful look. "Skills that you have."

The turtles stared at him, not comprehending at first. Finally Don said, "You want us...to join you?"

"Why not? Think of it as being...independent contractors."

Leonardo searched for some sign that Doshida was joking.

Sudden, harsh laughter from Raphael. "You've got some nerve, Saito. After what I've done for you- and the crap you put us through- *you* are offering *me* a job?" He laughed again, humorless, ironic. Suddenly, he whirled; his sai flew past Doshida's head and thudded into the back of his armchair. "That a strong enough answer for you?"

A flash of irritation crossed Doshida's face as he regarded the weapon protruding from his furniture. "I'm not surprised by your reaction." He looked at the other three turtles. "But if you stop to consider what I'm saying, you might realize it's not so ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous is your belief that we would serve your ambition." Somehow Leonardo's words, softly spoken, held as much malice as Raphael's display of violence.

"Think about it," Doshida persisted. "How will you make use of your impressive training, now that Saki is dead and the Foot is decimated? What do ordinary people do, besides trade their abilities to make a living? You may be far from ordinary, but I'm offering you a means whereby you won't have to settle for surviving at the edge of society."

"How we live," Leonardo said, "is not your concern."

Mike shook his head in amazement. "After all that's happened, why bother trying to convince us that we're on the same side?"

Doshida shrugged. "Like any new venture, Agete needs talent. You're four of the most capable ninja anywhere. Even if you did kill my cousin."

This last sentence was delivered so matter-of-factly that Leonardo couldn't read anything into it besides Doshida's usual, inscrutable self-assurance, worn so snugly that it obscured his schemes and motives.

Raphael walked up to the leader of the Rising Hand, staring him down. "She had it coming." He reached around and yanked his sai out of the chair. "Could become a family habit." He turned and headed for the door. "I've heard enough. Let's blow this joint."

"The exit is to the right of the lockers," Doshida said. To Donatello and Michelangelo, "Pride isn't always a practical ninja trait. Think about my offer."

"Think about this counteroffer," Leonardo replied as they turned to leave. "Rising Hand Inc. stays away from us, and we won't tip off the Foot as to your whereabouts."

Doshida's expression hardened.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

What a year.

Leonardo pulled his winter coat tighter, inhaled deeply, and let his breath out slowly, warming his hands with the steam. After weeks of bundling up and blasting the space heater in their underground home, it was bracing to be on a city rooftop at night. If it hadn't been for a break in the deep freeze, they would have joined Splinter and his arthritic knees in front of the television tonight. But their sensei had encouraged them to go, insisting good-naturedly that they were too young to settle for keeping an old rat company.

"One minute," Don announced. "Show's about to begin."

"Who wants some more?" Mike hoisted the bottle of champagne and refilled Don's plastic wine cup. "Raph?"

Raphael shook his head. He looked groggy and not too keen to be here. Winter slowed them all down, knocked off their metabolism, made them sleep a lot.

"Brothers, a toast." Mike raised his cup solemnly. They all did likewise. "To April and Casey. Damn them."

Chuckles all around as they thought of their friends, relaxing on a Mediterranean veranda.

"And to all that we have to be thankful for," he added.

"Hear, hear," Don said. The first whistles went off and bursts of fiery color began erupting over the New York skyline.

Leonardo sipped his cheap champagne. What would he remember most from this year? Raphael near death from poison. Donatello cut

open on an operating table. Karai kneeling in the courtyard. Each time, him, feeling helpless, as helpless as he was now to prevent the images from rising to mind. He pulled himself back to the present, appreciating anew the bite of cold on his skin, the fireworks in the sky, the company of his brothers. The one thing he did care to remember was that they'd all survived. That was nothing short of a miraculous accomplishment.

They finished off the bottle and stayed until the distant popping sounds and the accompanying blooms grew faint and infrequent. "That's all, folks," Mike said, "After party in Splinter's room!"

They took their time getting back, avoiding crowds of revelers in the streets. The few dozen feet of tunnels near home glowed from the colored Christmas lights that Mike and Don had strung up last month. The effect was more psychedelic underground nightclub than joyful Noel, but it elicited smiles nonetheless.

Mike threw his arms around Leo and Raph's shoulders and launched into song. *"Should old acquaintance be forgot..."*

"...And never brought to mind? Should old acquaintance..." Don joined in and Leo added his voice to the off-key chorus. Down here, they were free to sing as loudly as they wanted. He felt warm and relaxed from the drinks and the foray outside. Painful memories and worries receded like the mouths of the tunnels around them. And why not? It was a new year after all.

Mike stopped singing. "Hey Raph, you okay?"

"Yeah." Raphael took another couple steps, then staggered and nearly fell against the tunnel wall.

Michelangelo caught him under the arm. "C'mon, you've barely had anything to drink yet," he ribbed, but his expression belied his surprise and concern. Raphael had started the evening tired and uncommunicative, but now they saw that his face was flushed and his eyes were glazed with exhaustion.

Mike put the back of his hand to Raph's head. "Hey, you're pretty warm."

Raph swatted the hand away and steadied himself. "I think I've come down with the flu, okay? Let's keep going."

Donatello was suddenly very serious. "Raph," he said, standing in front of his brother and taking him by the shoulders, "have you noticed anything else? Any other weird symptoms?"

Raphael frowned. "Like what?"

"Like... are you... not urinating as much?"

Sullen, embarrassed silence.

"Does this hurt?" Don pressed down on Raphael's torso, under the ribcage.

"Jeezus," Raphael hissed, wincing with pain and shoving his brother's hands away. "Alright, doc, lay off. What's the matter with me, since you seem to know."

Donatello looked to Mike and Leo in dismay. "I thought Chambers said I was a perfect match."

"He did," Leo said. A pit had opened up in his stomach and the earlier lightness of the evening was draining out of it. "But he also said that was no guarantee."

"But he's been healthy for months," Mike said, stricken.

"Apparently it can still happen, months or years later."

"What? What are you talking about?" Raphael demanded.

Leo met his gaze. "Organ rejection."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Splinter was asleep by the time they returned. Leonardo poked his head into the lair, then retreated and pulled the door closed behind him. "We'll talk out here," he said, leading them a little ways down the tunnel.

"I don't see what there is to talk about," Raphael grumbled.

Leo said to Donatello, "He needs medicine, right? Anti-rejection drugs."

"Yes." Don sounded ashamed, as if he were to blame for his kidney being rejected.

"How do we get them?" Mike wrung his hands. "We can't go back to Dr. Chambers."

"No," Leo said. "We can't." He'd left the man who'd saved Raph's life safely asleep in his bedroom, drugged with amnesiac. It had seemed a prudent decision at the time- the doctor had samples of their blood and tissue after all -but he had not foreseen this happening.

"Could April get them for us?" Mike wondered. "She's not back until the end of the month."

"I don't know," Don muttered. "An organ transplant isn't the sort of thing she can fake." They owed their emergency supply of painkillers and antibiotics to a prescription-happy doctor who was under the impression that April suffered from chronic muscle pain and recurrent bladder infections.

"Maybe we should call her anyways."

"No!" Raphael interjected. "We're not calling her."

"If we got into a pharmacy, could we figure out what to take?"

Don's eyes were wide. "I have no idea. I don't know what they keep in there and how they work."

"We'd have to be able to disable the video cameras and security system," Leo mused.

Mike said, "What if we find someone who's just had a kidney transplant, follow them when they leave the hospital-"

"Stop it!" Raphael roared, turning all their heads. "Are you listening to yourselves? You're gonna break into Rite Aid? Filch the stash from some guy fresh out of surgery? Have you lost your fucking minds?"

Leo frowned at Raphael's outburst. It was his well-being they were discussing. "We're just considering the options. We'd find a way to pay-"

"Don't be an idiot. Even if you pull off one of those nutty ideas, you'll get- what- a couple weeks worth of meds? Then what?"

"Maybe it'll be enough, right? Shouldn't we do what we can now?" Mike took a step, hands extended to clasp Raphael's arm, then stopped himself, knowing better than to try to.

"A few weeks can matter, Raph," Don reminded him gently. "We've bought time for a heavier price."

Raphael grimaced as if it hurt to look at Don. "Well, maybe that wasn't such a great idea either, Einstein," he snapped, "throwing away a perfectly good kidney."

Donatello's face filled with hurt.

"You asshole," Leo whispered. "After what Don has done-"

"It's okay, Leo," Don said quietly.

"No, it's not." Leo pinned Raphael with a reproving glare. "It's not okay to act like a jerk when your family is trying to help you."

"Help me? You were talking right over me! *I* get a say in this. I'm not in a goddamn coma this time!" Raphael took a shaky breath, wobbling. Yelling was tiring him.

Leonardo felt keenly, ironically, torn between wanting to smack his brother and putting a hand out to steady him. "Okay. Fine. What is it you want to say?"

Raphael's voice came down an octave, but it was dead serious. "I am *not* going to be an invalid. We are *not* signing up for a routine of creatively stealing meds for me. Do you hear me?" He glanced at Don. "You've done enough. Look, we take our chances in battle, don't we? Either I beat this or I don't."

Don did not meet Raph's eyes. "This isn't the sort of thing you can beat, Raph."

Raphael pretended not to hear him. He stepped up to Leo and jabbed a finger at his chest. " *You* wouldn't stand for all this, would you, if it were you instead of me? That's why you couldn't even bring yourself to tell me the truth last year. Well, this time, *I* call the shots. About my own life- I can do that at least, can't I?"

Raphael's voice was hostile and accusing, but Leonardo saw something else in his eyes. Raphael begging him to understand. And how could he not?

"Promise me," Raphael said, "You won't make any calls, not on this. After last year, you *owe* me that much."

Leonardo's anger had drained away and been replaced with heavy, dull uncertainty. He felt as though the pit inside of him had grown to encompass his head and there was a hollow whooshing sound emanating from it. Slowly, he nodded.

"Say it," Raphael insisted.

"I promise."

Raphael searched his brother's face and finding it sincere, he sagged a little, fatigue writ large on his face. He looked at Donatello. "I didn't mean it," he mumbled.

"I know."

They walked silently back to the lair. Splinter was standing in the entryway.

"Master," Leo exclaimed. "I'm sorry- we woke you. We didn't mean to..."

"My hearing has remained undiminished with age, Leonardo," Splinter replied. He was somber as he ran his eyes over his sons. Hoarsely, "Raphael-"

Raphael inclined his head in a curt parting bow before retreating to his room. "G'night, sensei. Happy New Year."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Perhaps the extra cold weather had something to do with it, throwing off Raphael's immune system in some way, but it caught all of them off guard, how quickly he deteriorated over the next two weeks. Though he smoldered with constant, helpless rage at the betrayal by his own body, Raphael spoke not a word about any of it- the worsening fever, the bloating, the debilitating aches and chills- and neither did Leonardo, who stood vigilant but silent on the other side of the moat that Raphael was digging around himself.

Mike witnessed only one conversation between them about it, a few days after New Year's. Leo had cornered Raph over breakfast and said, "Can we at least *talk* about what we could do?"

"You remember your promise?"

"Yes."

"Good. 'Cause I'll talk when I feel like it. And I don't feel like it."

So their usual routine continued as if nothing was wrong, all of them playing the charade that Raphael perpetuated by doing things like showing up for training, even though he took a turn for the worse after nearly passing out. After that, if he came at all, Leo devoted the sessions to stretching and breathing exercises. The three of them wordlessly took over Raphael's chores so he could crawl into bed early each night. But by the third week, he was having a hard time even getting out of bed, and they could no longer pretend or hold back.

"You're being a proud, selfish, irrational ass, you know that, right?" Don said, wringing out a cold towel to slake his fever.

"Are you trying to prove something? Are you getting back at us for last year?" Mike implored. "Because we're sorry!"

Even after being taken aside by Splinter and told, "As your sensei, I respect your decision. But as your father, I ask you to reconsider. Let your brothers find a way to help you," Raphael remained stubbornly callous. Either, "Gimme a break. I've been through worse than this," or more circumspectly, "There's lots of people out there who could use medicine they haven't got, alright? Doesn't give 'em a free pass to steal it, or sell their kids, or bankrupt the family or something, does it?"

Or something, Mike thought.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

He'd told them that he was going out for a movie. Alone. That, and his nervousness, might have raised an eye ridge or two, but recent things considered, no one doubted his need to escape. However, despite the conviction with which he'd left the lair, doubt had hit Michelangelo hard as soon as he'd reached the surface. Now, although he'd been here for almost an hour, unwisely exposing himself to cold, it seemed impossible to will himself forward or backward. Either would be a colossal surrender.

Leo's promise, he finally reminded himself. *Not mine.* Steeling himself, he shook some warmth into his limbs, and made his way towards the back door of the building. It was unmarked but he knew where it led. He ignored the security keypad and pass card reader, and instead stepped back, looked straight into the security camera and threw a pebble at the lens. Then- he could *not* believe he was doing this- he waved.

Nothing happened for several minutes. He waited, glancing around furtively at the mostly empty parking lot, suppressing his instinctive fear of being so exposed. Just as disappointment and relief had begun to well inside him, he heard the *click* of the door being unlocked. Hesitantly, he pulled on it and it opened. He stepped inside. *Too late to turn back now.* He walked down the hallway and into Saito Doshida's office.

"Michelangelo, am I right?" Doshida said. He was sitting behind his desk, his feet propped up on the side drawer, looking through a file folder balanced on his lap.

Mike nodded, a little surprised. "You know our names."

"I'd be a fool not to have done my homework on your family." Doshida set the folder aside and regarded Michelangelo with a disconcertingly studious gaze. "So you do wear clothes."

Mike glanced down at his extra-large maroon ski jacket and shrugged. "Yeah, now you see why we avoid it. A turtle stuffed into a parka isn't exactly art of invisibility material, you know? Besides, the color selection at the Goodwill drop-off is terrible." *Cut it out,* he warned himself. *Get what you came for, don't talk too much.*

Doshida's lips curled in something that might have been amusement. "I think I prefer talking to you over your brothers. So far you haven't flung any weapons at me."

"I wasn't planning to." He felt as though the next words materialized in his mouth and did not come from him at all. "I came to take you up on your offer."

"Just you."

"That's right."

Doshida squinted at him skeptically. "Tell me more."

"I want a... short-term arrangement. Just enough to earn my fee."

"That being...?"

Michelangelo handed the man a piece of folded paper. Doshida opened it and his eyebrows lifted as he smiled faintly. Mike felt a stab of loathing- for the man behind the desk, and for himself, for what he was doing.

Doshida refolded the paper and set it down. "It's a lot."

"Can you get that much?"

A thoughtful silence. "I believe so."

Mike silently let out a breath. "Okay, then. What would you have me do?"

Doshida leaned back in his chair. "Three assignments, over the next three months. You'll get the brief on each job ahead of time. No obligations after three months."

Mike nodded. "I want to be paid in advance."

Surely he expected the condition, but Doshida paused as if he were considering it carefully. "Then what assurance would I have that you'll see this through?"

Michelangelo opened his hands in a gesture of sincerity. "I won't back out of an agreement I've made."

Doshida narrowed his eyes knowingly. "You are here alone."

The man was too perceptive. Michelangelo swallowed, feeling weak inside. "You have my word," he said. "On the honor of my family."

Doshida scrutinized him for another second, then nodded. "That's one thing I don't doubt. Fine. You'll receive half of your payment as soon as I can get it, and the rest once you've finished the last assignment." He seemed satisfied. "Acceptable?"

"No assassinations." *I won't kill for you. Not again, not ever.*

"If you say so." Doshida picked up his phone and started dialing.

"What are you doing?"

"Arranging for you to meet your team. Assuming you can start tonight."

"My... my team?"

"All the operatives in Agete have assigned strike teams."

"Uh-uh, no, I don't think so," Michelangelo said quickly. "This is meant to be, like, a solo turtle gig. I don't need a team. I don't want anyone else involved. In fact, since it's only for a few months, it doesn't make sense for you to bring any of your people into this." He gestured vehemently. "Look, put the phone down."

Doshida depressed the cradle switch but held onto the receiver. "Virtually every assignment is handled by a strike team. It's how we operate around here."

"That's not what I had in mind."

"Then I'm afraid this won't work."

They regarded each other across the desk. The stalemate stretched into a minute, and Michelangelo realized, with a sinking feeling, that he was not in a good negotiating position.

But it was Doshida who sighed and leaned forward. "The strike teams are one of the biggest differences between the Rising Hand and a traditionally hierarchical ninja clan. Each team has a mix of skills and experiences, and by keeping the teams intact over the course of many missions, they become far more effective. I learned that valuable lesson years ago, watching you and your brothers in your war against the Foot." Doshida paused to take in Mike's stunned expression. "So you of all people should appreciate why I insist on this. By the way, that's your first assignment. To train the team."

Michelangelo was dumbfounded. "Train them? In what?"

"In whatever you think they need to work together as a capable ninja squad."

This thing is going off the rails, Mike thought, desperately thinking of how to salvage the situation. "I've never trained anyone," he said, "and I won't exactly fit in. So this wouldn't be the best way to use one of the three assignments I've agreed to."

"On the contrary," Doshida replied, "your expertise is far more valuable to me than any one mission. My terms are firm."

He could turn around and walk out the way he came in, and pretend this conversation never happened. But he knew, by his reaction to the thought, that he couldn't do that. Doshida's conditions had thrown him for a loop, but then again, he had feared signing up for something illegal or immoral; three months of private lessons for a small group of Rising Hand ninjas couldn't be so bad. "You realize," he said, "my brothers and I were raised together. It's not like I can teach a team to be anything like that in three months."

"I know."

Michelangelo chewed the inside of his cheek. *This is so totally messed up.* "Okay," he said.

"Good." Doshida lifted his hand off the phone and redialed. "Tami, can you come over here?" He hung up the phone and stood up. "If you'll excuse me." He walked past Mike and exited his office, closing the door behind him and leaving the turtle alone.

Mike let out a long breath and turned in a slow circle. The movie he'd told his family he was going to see would be ending soon. They wouldn't worry at first- the streets were quiet, he wouldn't look for trouble, and he knew how to handle the cold- but they might wonder.

The door opened again and Saito Doshida walked in with a woman trailing close behind him. He must have already spoken to her because, although her eyes widened in amazement and fascination, she wasn't startled to see Michelangelo. Her face was small, attractive and racially ambiguous- part-Asian? part-Hispanic?- and made even more so by the fact that her short hair was dyed a wild shade of blue. She wore a snug-fitting leather jacket and jeans on a frame that was toned and slender without being thin.

"This is Tami," Doshida said. "I've explained our agreement to her, and she will take you from here."

"Hello," Michelangelo said.

The woman narrowed her eyes at him and turned with a beckoning jerk of her blue head. Mike glanced at Doshida, then followed her out of the office. He glimpsed the set of throwing knives sheathed on the ninja utility belt she wore underneath her leather jacket.

"So," he said, "are you on the team I'm supposed to be working with?"

She cast him a sidelong look and nodded.

"Not much of a talker, huh? That's okay. I wouldn't talk to strange green men either if I were you."

They climbed a set of stairs to the second floor, reaching a hallway with windows on the left side overlooking the open training area that Mike had seen the first time he had been here. The right side had several closed doors with keypad locks. Tami stopped in front of one of them and turned to face Michelangelo.

"Doshida-san must know what he's doing," she said. "But I've heard about you...turtles, and so has every ninja in the city. So watch yourself." She paused meaningfully. "'Cause we'll be watching you." On that welcoming note, she punched a code into the keypad and pushed open the door.

The space Michelangelo stepped into consisted of two connected rooms. In the first, a man was sitting on a sofa with his feet propped up on the coffee table. Another man was standing near the back wall near the mini-fridge. A bag of Doritos lay open near the television, which was frozen on pause in the middle of a video game. Through the doorway on the far side of the room, a third man was hunched over one of the laptops that sat on a large work desk. Maps and lists were tacked to the wall-to-ceiling magnetic whiteboards.

"Whoa. Dorm room meets war room," Michelangelo thought, then realized he'd voiced it aloud. Every head turned, and the room fell

silent. Mike found himself, for once, uncomfortable at being the center of attention.

The man standing by the wall came forward. Mike's first thought was that he looked like a character out of an action flick - buzz cut, square jaw and dark sunglasses. The sleeveless shirt he wore over black jeans showed off the tattoos on his arms- twin cobras coiled around large, muscled biceps. "What is this?" he drawled.

"Our newest addition," Tami said.

"No freakin' way!" The man in the other room, a wiry, fidgety fellow with curls of disheveled hair poking out from under a well-worn ball cap, leapt up from his computer and rushed over, stopping just a few feet away from Michelangelo and staring, open-mouthed, as if he wanted to poke him to determine if he was a CGI image. "So these guys are actually real!"

"Of course they're real." The man on the sofa rose to his feet and Michelangelo blinked in surprise. It was the teenager he'd seen outside the club months ago, the same one he'd fought last year, who'd now twice led him to the Rising Hand. Tonight he was wearing a black t-shirt and camouflage pants, the tips of his short, spiky hair highlighted orange, a wary look of recognition on his boyishly smooth face. "I've seen them before."

An uncertain silence followed and Mike seized it by holding his hand out to the young man. "Mike. I'm your diversity candidate." The teen eyed the green three-fingered hand as if worried it would grab him. Mike added good-naturedly, "Don't worry, I'm not contagious."

Reluctantly, with an air of forced assertiveness, as if compelled to prove he wasn't afraid, the teen shook Mike's hand. "Ren."

"I like the hair." Mike looked from Ren to Tami. "You guys have got a kind of team look going. Wish I could try something new, 'cause green scalp gets kind of old, you know?" He turned to the other two men. "What're your names?"

The man who'd been at the computer gaped at him. "Simon."

The man with the sunglasses folded his arms.

"Everyone calls him Snake," Tami said.

"Like a code name? What came first, the name or the tattoos?"

"The name." Snake's voice was low and gravelly, bringing to mind a crocodile rather than a snake. "From my military days."

"From one escaped military experiment to another, then." Mike brought his hand up in a mock salute.

Snake remained expressionless behind his mirrored sunglasses. "You're some kind of joker, turtle."

"It's worse when I'm nervous." Mike looked to Tami. "So, uh, help the new guy out. How do things work around here?"

"How about you tell us what you're doing here in the first place," Snake said. "We hear you've got your own kind. So what's your game?"

Michelangelo faced the man and took a small, firm step forward. "Hey, we've all got our own reasons for being here. We don't need to question each other's. I'll do my part; I'm not here to mess with anyone."

He guessed by their expressions that they were reconciling his disarming manner with the battle stories they'd heard. For a second, Michelangelo felt terrified. He was not supposed to be doing this- recklessly exposing himself and interacting with humans, much less soliciting their trust. He shoved the terror into the back of his mind and shut the door on it.

"So what *is* your part?" Snake asked with obvious skepticism.

"Your boss wants me to teach you guys to work together." He looked around the circle of guarded faces and shrugged. "Look, I know I'm a giant talking turtle, you've no reason to trust me, and you've probably heard some things about my family that you wouldn't want to repeat to my face. But I'm here for three months and I happen to have a lot of, I guess, 'team player' experience."

Snake gave a dubious huff as Tami, Ren and Simon exchanged glances.

Tami said, "We'll start tomorrow, then."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Raphael was lying on the sofa, half-asleep, a reality TV show on stand-up comedians playing unnoticed. Michelangelo picked up the remote and turned off the television. He set three white pill bottles on the coffee table.

Raph stirred. His skin was a sickly, cringe-inducing shade of yellowish-green. It took a few seconds for his glassy eyes to focus, first on Michelangelo and then on the pill bottles.

"You have to take all three together," Mike explained.

Raphael sat up far too suddenly and had to steady himself on the edge of the table. He snatched up the bottles and examined them, eyes narrowed. "What is this?"

"Anti-rejection drugs. You'll have to take them for a while, but they should get you back to your mean old self soon enough." He tried for a smile.

Their lair was not large and in the quiet that followed he knew he'd attracted everyone's attention. Leonardo and Splinter came in from the training room. Donatello stopped in the doorway with a blanket he'd presumably been bringing to his brother.

Leonardo crossed over to the sofa and looked from Raph to Mike in bewilderment. "Where did you get them?"

Mike hardened his nerves. With four expectant sets of eyes on him, the reasonable-sounding speech he'd mentally prepared flew from his head, leaving only blunt truth.

"I bargained for them. They're...payment. For work."

Slowly, comprehension dawned on Raphael's sallow face. "You didn't," he intoned.

"Doshida." Leonardo stared aghast at the pill bottles. "These are from him."

"There are whole boxes of them in the south tunnel storage room," Mike said hastily. "Enough to last for years, in case we need more."

Raphael's face contorted, and with a sudden, violent motion he flung the bottles across the room. They ricocheted off the wall, and one of them broke open, sending its small white contents pinging off the furniture and scattering across the floor. "Take them back," he said through gritted teeth.

To his surprise and humiliation, Michelangelo felt tears prick the backs of his eyes. He forced them away and fought unsuccessfully to keep the hurt out of his voice. "Don't be like that, please. It was the only way to get what we needed. Quickly enough, and lots of it."

Leonardo's tone was stony. "We agreed not to have anything to do with Agete."

He'd known it would be like this, but seeing Leonardo and Raphael in such rare and vehement accord against him stunned Michelangelo into silence.

It was Donatello that said, "Actually, I don't recall you asking for opinions."

Leonardo stared at him in disbelief. Coming from Donatello, it was hard not to take the mild remark as a full-blown rebuke. "Saito Doshida," Leonardo said, "is a dishonorable scheming bastard who is the reason why Raph has your kidney in the first place."

"I happen to remember," Donatello said, without a hint of sarcasm. "But he's also opportunistic and resourceful, and willing to strike a deal."

Raphael wheeled on him accusingly. "So you knew about this?"

Don shook his head. "Mike asked me to find out what drugs we'd need."

"First that fucking antidote, and now this." Raphael was livid. "I am not Doshida's charity case!"

"It's not charity," Michelangelo protested. "Like I said, I traded for it."

Raphael opened his mouth to retort, but Splinter cut him off. "Let Michelangelo finish what he has to say."

Splinter had not spoken up until now. Mike tried desperately but unsuccessfully to read his sensei's expression, but the elderly rat was poker-faced as he clasped both his hands over the handle of his walking stick.

Raphael was unable to hold back. "Master Splinter, won't you tell Mike-"

"Enough." Splinter still had the power, with a word, to wield authority over his grown sons. Fuming, Raphael held his tongue. "Now, Michelangelo, explain this situation."

With a pang of chagrin, Mike suddenly felt five years old again. Faced with his father's disapproval, he was reacting as he always did- not defiantly, like Raphael, or responsibly, like Leonardo, or stoically, like Donatello- but plaintively and miserably, spilling himself out like an upturned bag of rice. "I had to do it, Master Splinter, I couldn't- I couldn't stomach what Leo and Raph agreed to, and Don's already done the impossible- so two nights ago I went to Doshida and agreed to work for him. He paid me in advance, I met the shipment this morning at the empty warehouse address I gave him, and there's more coming. Raph's right, we can't count on routinely getting small amounts- I figured Doshida, with his chemicals and poisons and all that, must know how to lay his hands on any sort of drug. And it's fair- I'm not doing anything awful, I won't.

It's just three jobs, over three months. Like Don said, he's not out to kill us, and if he wants to use us, we can use him too-"

"What have you agreed to do?" Splinter interjected.

Michelangelo wished he could shrink into his shell like an ordinary turtle. "I only have the first assignment so far. I'm...training one of his squad teams. They're kind of green when it comes to ninja teamwork skills..."

His eyes flicked over to the faces of his brothers. Leonardo seemed to have stopped breathing. "You're training the Rising Hand?" he croaked.

"Err...well, just four people. Listen, I know how risky this sounds, and it's not at all what I intended, believe me. But actually those guys are not all that bad... they're kind of cautious but they don't hate us the way the Foot do. They were even pretty cool about it-"

"Oh go figure," Raphael blurted. "Trust him to make *friends* with them!"

"Michelangelo," Splinter said. He sighed heavily, his countenance melting into a mixture of compassion, subdued anger, and heartache that made Mike want to crawl to him on his knees. "You acted with the noblest, most caring of intentions. But this... predicament you have put yourself in affects all of us. What is done is done. We must decide what to do now."

"What's to decide? I already told him to take it back," Raphael said. "Deal's off."

"No, I won't. I can't," Mike insisted.

"Do you know how awful you look Raph?" Don said quietly. "You drove Mike to this."

Raphael's eyes bulged. " *I* drove him-"

"Stop, please!" Mike yelled. "Master," he said, pleading but determined, " *I* made the decision to act like I did, and I know the danger it puts me in, puts all of us in. But I've already done the worst of it, I've met and started training Doshida's people. Turning back now won't change that, it'll only mean-" he glanced at Raphael and did not finish. He turned to Leonardo. "Leo," he said. "I swore. On the honor of this family, I swore I'd keep my end of the bargain."

Leonardo looked like he was in pain. His eyes traveled from Michelangelo's earnest expression, to Donatello's calm but piercing gaze, to Raphael's disbelieving but horribly pallid face, then finally to his sensei. A look of resigned understanding passed between them. "Then there's nothing more to say," Leo said. "The honor of this family is not lightly given."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

They'd barely dumped their suitcases in the hall, poured themselves some celebratory wine and collapsed on the sofa in jet-lagged exhaustion when they heard knocking on the balcony window. With a tired groan, April dragged herself to her feet and slid her balcony door open all the way.

"April!" Donatello caught her up in a hug.

"Hi boys." She hugged Don back tightly, arms curving around the familiar slope of his shell. It was silly, to call them 'boys' - but she had a feeling she could never give it up. Surely she was the only person in the world who looked forward to seeing dark inhuman shapes climbing through her window at night.

"It's great to see you, April," Leo said, embracing her in turn and stepping into the apartment. "You too, Casey. How was the trip?"

"Amazing," April gushed, grinning with a school girl giddiness that was quite unlike her. Nearly a month in southern Europe - she hadn't been on such a long vacation since college. And despite her pre-trip trepidation, spending all that time with Casey had been... remarkably smooth. Great, in fact. So great that they'd talked seriously about moving back in together.

"You miss us?" Casey asked, bumping fists with Leo. "Cause we didn't miss you!"

"Casey," April admonished. "We did miss you guys. How've you been?"

From the hesitation before Leo said, "We're fine," she knew they weren't. Mike's embrace as he came in, not his usual exuberant one,

but tighter, longer and more subdued, made her search his face, worried.

"Glad you're home," he said, smiling now, broadly, but not unreservedly.

"Raph," she said, making a move towards him as he followed his brothers in, but as he stepped from the dark balcony into the lighted apartment, she caught her breath. He gave her a wan smile, then pulled her into a hug. "Hey, you."

She drew back. "Raph, are you okay?"

"Been under the weather," he said. He stepped aside to give Casey a chest bump.

"Geez, man, you don't look so hot," Casey said.

"I'm on the upswing," Raph said shortly. "Enough with the babying. You guys brought us some souvenirs, or what?"

April looked at the other turtles for an explanation, but none of them obliged her with eye contact. As she and Casey dragged over their suitcases, pulled out bottles of olive oil and Spanish brandy, scrolled through photos on the camera and unfolded a map to show their friends where they'd stayed and traveled, she could sense a heavy tension behind their enthusiastic questions and appreciative smiles. It wasn't the kind of unifying battle-stress she'd seen in them before, but something different. They were all studiously paying attention to her and Casey and not to each other. Missing was the brotherly banter, the jokes at each other's expense, the roughhousing that she swore would get her evicted someday.

After half an hour, Leo said, "We only meant to stop by and welcome you home. We'll get going and let you two relax and unpack."

After they'd disappeared off the balcony, April let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She climbed onto the sofa and

curled up against Casey, laying a head against his shoulder. "What do you think happened?"

He huffed, indulging her question, which they both knew led only to pointless speculation. "You know how it is, babe. They'll tell us when they're ready. Or not."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

With Roku Squad, as he'd learned they were called, looking at him expectantly, Michelangelo ran a nervous hand over his head, wondering how best to begin. Agete's large training area made him feel even more openly scrutinized, with its high overhead lights reflecting off of shiny new floors, a stark contrast to his comfortably cramped and dim underground home. Earlier today, he had very much wanted to ask Leonardo's advice on basic training exercises, but had immediately recoiled from the idea; he didn't need to salt the wound. "Okay," he said. "Let's start with some sparring."

Snake, his arms crossed, snorted. "That's all we've been doing so far this week. You're supposed to be teaching us teamwork stuff, *coach* ."

"That starts with me knowing what each of you can do, and how you fight," Mike said lightly. "Something different today, though. Three on one." He shifted into a ready stance, beckoning for Tami, Ren and Snake to attack him together.

They looked at each other. Snake curled his lip back. "Can you believe it? He's trying to show off."

Mike shook his head. "I'm not. No need to pummel me, just stay loose, relaxed."

Tami came at him first and he defended without retaliating, watching and assessing the way she moved. He'd learned a fair amount over the past few days. Tami was quick and feisty, weaker in close quarters and empty-handed, but a positively lethal sharpshooter with her throwing knives. Ren was inexperienced, especially with weapons, but was a solid, practical fighter with good instincts. As for Snake, he seemed to draw from a mix of street fighting, martial arts,

boxing, military training, and who knew what else. He could handle himself, no question. But he moved lazily, as if he were only slightly amused and bored by Mike's presence.

Simon was the exception; he had no combat training but was a technical whiz that could hack into any computer or crack any security system. Mike imagined that he and Donatello could have some pretty interesting conversations- interesting to them, at any rate. The man was sitting against the far wall, his laptop, invisibly and constantly tethered to his body, sitting open on the thighs of his ripped jeans, his eyes fixed on the screen. Every once in a while, he would look up with some interest before returning to his mysterious work.

He paused to watch now, as Mike took advantage of Ren's attack and chipped him with a kick behind the knee, causing him to stumble into Tami. He dodged Snake's grab and swung behind him, putting the big man between himself and the other two fighters. "Okay," Mike said, calling time-out with his hands. "There actually is a point to this.

"The first thing to know about fighting as a team: your teammates are your worst enemies. Unless you know how to fight together, you'll just get in each other's way and neutralize each other's attacks. If you don't communicate, you'll be confused, but if you do, you'll give yourselves away."

They were listening to him. Mike picked up speed and confidence as he pried out memories of how he and his brothers had trained to fight together, and started putting into words his intuitive knowledge of how they did so now. "Fighting together against multiple opponents isn't about taking turns, and it's not about splitting up, like, 'you take him, and I'll take him'. It's actually about controlling space. Control the space and you control the fight. That means always knowing where your teammates are, and understanding the space each of you is responsible for, all the time." Excitedly, he pulled Tami and Ren over and positioned them near each other. "Okay, for example, let's say Tami and Ren are fighting me and Snake. If I hit Tami and then move over here to hit Ren, and you both jump to get

me, then I can use you against each other, plus you just gave Snake a big fat opening. But let's say instead, that Tami knows that this space, including her flank, is Ren's..."

He worked with them for a few hours, and even Snake, though he remained coolly unsmiling, did nothing but listen attentively, ask questions, and do the drills Mike devised. At the end, as they climbed the stairs back to the team room, Tami asked him, "Is it easier, or harder- fighting together?"

"Harder," Mike said without hesitation. "But better."

Tami's small chin jutted out in thoughtful, grudging appreciation. "That was a good session tonight," she admitted without looking at him, then grabbed her coat and gear and headed for the door.

Mike smiled; it *had* been pretty good. Cogent, articulate, damn near *Leonardo-like* , if he did say so himself.

He pulled his coat on (it was still too cold to be outside without one), then paused, noticing Ren still sitting on the sofa. Snake and Simon were already gone. On a whim, he sat down next to the teen, leaving a comfortably large space between them. "Waiting for someone?"

"My friend was going to give me a ride."

"Tall guy with one earring?"

"Yeah," Ren said in surprise. "How would you know?"

Mike shrugged. "A good memory for faces. Speaking of which, I've been meaning to ask you... um, how your wrist is doing."

The boy looked down at his right wrist, rolling it in a slow circle. "It was in a cast for a while, but it seems okay now."

"That's good." *Aw, heck.* "Hey...sorry that I broke it. It was the circumstances at the time, you know?"

"S'okay. I get it." He glanced up at the turtle nervously, then looked back down at his hands, as if he'd only just realized he was alone with one of the fantastical killer mutants of lore and didn't want to make eye contact, but couldn't help wanting to stare at him. "I can't believe you even remember me. I was just one guy that night."

Mike didn't mention that he'd seen Ren twice more after that, without him knowing it. Instead he said, "Good memory, like I said. Besides, it is hard to forget a guy who was that bad with a short sword."

Ren's head came up, a retort on his lips, but was thrown off by Michelangelo's wide, teasing grin. "I wasn't that bad," he mumbled. Then, with drooping shoulders, "Well, maybe I was."

"I'm just playing," Mike said. Constant put-downs and insults were part of life with three brothers, and he hadn't really stopped to think that this lonely-looking kid who didn't know him might not take it in such good humor. "Although," he added, "I really don't see you as a short sword person. Have you thought about focusing on the hanbo? Or the kama? They would suit your fighting style better."

"Really? You think so?"

"Sure." He stood up. "I should get going. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yeah." The nervousness in Ren's face had faded into a slightly quizzical expression. He raised a hand briefly. "Tomorrow."

It would take Michelangelo a long time to get home. Each night, he took a different route, detouring and doubling back, taking every precaution to make sure he never compromised the way to the lair. And when he did arrive, a pall of tension would arrive with him, a clingy film that his forced good cheer and best cooking could push against but not dissolve. Dwelling on it, as he slipped from shadow to shadow, alley to alley, moving quickly to keep his heart rate up and his body warm, his good mood dissipated into the cold night air like the steam from his breath, and he felt a heaviness of heart settling in. After he was certain that he was not being tailed, he found

himself, not rounding the bend in the tunnel near home, but climbing up the fire escape ladder of April's apartment building.

"Mike," April exclaimed, sliding open her balcony door when he tapped on it. "What are you doing out here alone? It's late and cold." She hugged herself in her pajamas, letting him in and shutting the door quickly.

"Sorry, April. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, no, it's fine." She started a kettle of water boiling. "Is everything okay?"

Yes. No. "I was just on my way home..." he stalled in his explanation and sat down on her sofa, mutely watching as she opened the tin of hot chocolate powder, measured a spoonful into two mugs, added milk, poured in water from the steaming kettle, and stirred, eyebrows raised and fingers turning the clinking spoon long after the chocolate had dissolved, but not pressing him to continue.

She handed him a mug and tucked into the corner of the sofa across from him, pulling her legs up under her. After taking a short sip from her own mug, she asked, "How's Raph?"

"Doing a lot better," he answered, his spirits lifting at his own words. As rapidly as Raphael had fallen ill, he was rebounding; his fever was down, his color and energy returning. Michelangelo had retrieved the bottles Raph had thrown against the wall, painstakingly gathered all the scattered pills he could find and held a dose out to his brother in one hand, a glass of water in the water. "Take them," he'd urged. "Hate me if you have to, but take them." The line of Raphael's jaw had stiffened. Without looking at Mike, he'd accepted the pills and swallowed him, turning away as he did so. But he'd been taking them without fail ever since.

"Thank goodness," April said. "He looked so sick...it was like last year..."

Mike sidled over and put his arms around her, comforting himself. She was so soft and warm, with no hard carapace or plastron, no rough calluses or scars- slim and fragile. When he let go, he rested his head against the cushions, his voice a little muffled as he said, "It happened over New Year's."

She listened in silence as he talked, recounting the awful first three weeks of the year, unloading the weight of what he had done, and then sharing with her what he couldn't comfortably tell his brothers - what the people on Roku Squad were like, the challenge of training them, his accomplishments so far. He didn't pause and she didn't stop him. When he was finished, he drained the dredges of his mug and said, "That was really good hot chocolate." With a sigh, he set it down on her coffee table. "I've kept you up really late," he said apologetically.

"I'm glad you came." She reached over and put a sympathetic hand on his knee. "You should get home before they worry about you."

He nodded, standing, and feeling, finally, as though he had enough fortifying warmth to brave the chill. "Thanks April," he whispered as he slipped out.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

"Sensei."

Splinter completed a final stroke with his brush and set it down on its tray. "Ah, thank you Leonardo." He took the cup of tea that his son held out to him and wrapped it in his long, bony fingers, inhaling the rising scent of jasmine.

Leonardo sank to the ground next to his master.

"It is from an old poem," Splinter explained. "I am rediscovering calligraphy in my old age. I find it quiets the mind."

Leonardo studied the precise, flowing brushstrokes, so akin to the elegance of a well-handled katana. "I'm not sure anything can quiet my mind right now." Speaking miserably to the floor, "I don't know how I've let all this happen."

Splinter took a sip of his tea. His round, bottomless eyes were sympathetic but serious. "Leonardo. I know it can be hard to see, but there is a thin line between shouldering responsibility and taking blame."

"I couldn't imagine that Mike would get mixed up with the Rising Hand like this. And what Don did last year- that crazy gamble- I didn't see that coming either. With Raph," Leo laughed weakly, "it comes with the territory, but the others... what am I doing wrong, *chichi* ?"

Splinter was silent for so long that Leonardo began to feel nervous. It was hard enough to admit to it himself, this sense of failure and loss of control, much less to voice it out loud to his sensei.

Finally, Splinter said, "You do not see what I see, and that is why you judge yourself so harshly." He laid a hand on Leo's arm. "You cannot

expect to predict or control your brothers, nor would they want that of you. You are one family, yes, made up of four grown men. Especially after I am gone, they will look to you, even more so than they do now, to understand that." His voice softened. "You may not realize it, but I have seen you do that admirably already."

Leonardo sat still, trying to absorb his sensei's words, unsure whether to feel reassured or discouraged. He did not like the casual way that Splinter sometimes talked about a time after his death, as if referring to the weather forecast for next Tuesday.

"As for this particular situation, I am no more comfortable with it than you are, Leonardo. But I do understand it. And in no small measure, I am grateful." He set down his cup and picked up his brush again. "Think on what I have said."

Leonardo stood. "I will, sensei," he said, as he bowed to leave.

Raphael was waiting for him in the training room. He was sitting against the wall, elbows on bent knees, idly and slowly turning the sai that he held balanced on its point on the scarred wood floor. "So did he make you feel better?" Raphael smirked. "Tell you that you aren't a big failure after all?"

Leonardo scowled at his brother's baiting. "What is it, Raph?"

Raphael rose to his feet. "What do you think?" He threw Leo his sparring gloves. "Warm up without weapons first."

Leonardo looked askance at him. "You're not well."

"I'm getting there."

Leonardo sighed. He knew what this was about. "Let me and Don handle it."

"No."

"You need to recover. You can't afford to go into battle and get injured."

"All the more reason to train, ain't it? And no playing around and going easy."

Leonardo gave his brother a long look. He still looks weak and tired, Leo thought. But his color's back, he's getting better. "Be sensible," he urged. "Can't you see all this will be in vain if-"

"Dammit!" Raphael snapped, cutting him off. "What good am I if I can't fight?" For a second, there was something in his eyes that Leonardo recognized and understood, before Raph shuttered it quickly behind the shield of a fierce glare. He fell into fighting stance. "Spar already."

Leonardo locked eyes with him. "You'll be careful," he said, not referring to the sparring. Like asking a rhino to fly, he thought morosely.

In response, Raphael snorted in exasperation and launched an opening flurry of strikes and blows that Leonardo fended off and countered with punitive low kicks. Raph was slower than usual, moving a little stiffly from his weeks off, but he had a wry smile on his face. "I don't know about you, but I feel better already."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

"Okay, let's try again," Michelangelo said. "This time, remember- eyes glued to your leader like he's the swimsuit edition centerfold. If you miss the signals, you won't know your position, and if you don't know your position, your partner can't cover you. And be quick with those signals! You need to know them in every possible combination. You can't be like, flipping through the pocket ninja dictionary!"

At Doshida's initiative and expense, the training area had been transformed into a mock-up of a narrow city street, with walls, crates, a dumpster, even the shell of a car. Mike cut the lights and plunged it into darkness. This time, Ren was on point and after a moment he led the others forward. The objective was simple: get everyone to the designated home base at the other end of the street as quickly as possible, without a mutant turtle taking anyone out first.

For almost two months he'd been training Roku Squad, and if Michelangelo allowed himself a moment of self-aggrandizement (and he did), he'd say he was doing a pretty decent job of it. Early on, he'd told them, "I'm not a taskmaster, since all this is pretty much for your own benefit, so even though we'll work hard, we'll just be chill about it, okay?" but nevertheless he was gratified that Tami and Ren were fast learners and willing students, and Snake was at least the former if not the latter.

And they were actually improving. The three of them were almost to home base now, using the available cover well, and staying connected to their teammates. Still, Mike saw the opening he knew would come. He rushed through the darkness silently and swept Ren off his feet and into a submission hold before anyone could move. "Game's up," he said.

Ren cursed under his breath. Mike said, "You were doing good, but as soon as you saw the target you let yourself get too far ahead of your team." He released him and helped him back to his feet. "Snake, you were covering him, you can't let him take off without you like that."

Snake's nostrils flared. "You must get a kick out of making us look stupid."

A Raphael-inspired remark came to mind, but he set it aside and shrugged, smiling. "Just trying to be helpful. Take it up with your boss if you don't like it." He turned to the others. "This goes for all of you though. Don't assume, just because he's calling the play, that your leader needs any less cover than the rest of you. If anything, he needs more."

Tami's cell phone rang, and she answered it as Mike went to switch the lights back on. When he returned, she said, "We have our next assignment."

Set in the middle of a large wooded property enclosed by dense hedges and a high brick wall, the mansion was not visible from the gravel service road half a mile away. Michelangelo knew it was there though; Roku Squad had spent the last week studying its blueprints, a map of its grounds, and the details of its security system, all of which confirmed that this wasn't the sort of place an uninvited person could easily get in or out of. Assignment H054 was to do both.

"Every assignment has a code that begins with H, G or K," Tami had explained to him, "standing for Hunt, Gather or Kill."

"How about 'E' for Eat and 'D' for Do Dishes?"

"Very funny. 'Hunt' means its a covert op- sabotage, security, finding or obtaining an object or person, that sort of thing. 'Gather' means it's an espionage mission where information is the goal- getting it or planting it. And 'Kill'- well that's self-explanatory."

Mike had leaned over the large desk in their team room and picked up one of the enlarged satellite photos of the mansion grounds, pulled off the internet and marked up with a Sharpie pen. "So, who's Mr. Moneybags?"

"A big-time fight promoter who didn't do as he was told, and then tried to blackmail the wrong people."

"Those being?"

"The Yamaguchi-gumi," Ren had answered from the other room, where he had been swinging a hanbo in practice. "My uncle's crowd."

Yakuza. Fabulous. Sitting, now, in the back of a van emblazoned with a fake landscaping company logo and parked next to the neighboring estate's gardening shed, Michelangelo bit his thumb knuckle apprehensively as Simon's fingers flew over the keys of his computer. He turned to Tami, who was checking her utility belt carefully, her eyes, large, long-lashed, and coolly businesslike, the only part of her face visible behind her ninja mask. "You're sure he's not in there," Mike said.

"He's at a cage fight in Vegas. The yakuza don't want him dead, they just want him toeing the line." Her eyebrows rose in mild puzzlement. "Why do you care, anyways?"

"I told Doshida I didn't want to kill anyone."

"How cute." Snake clipped on his own utility belt and slipped an extra knife into his boot. "The big coach is a real softie. Wouldn't have guessed it from the stories that go around."

Mike ignored the comment. "How's it looking, Simon?"

A power cord snaked from Simon's computer and its various attached devices, under the closed door of the van and into the gardening shed. "Looking good," he said. "Just like I figured, the

signals from the mansion's security system extend through the neighborhood power grid. Now once I crack the encryption... There, I'm in." He leaned back, swiveling his ball cap backwards with a flourish and raising his arms in triumph. "We're set to go."

After a few seconds of silence, Michelangelo realized they were all looking at him. He also realized that he'd been waiting, unconsciously and out of habit, to hear Leonardo's voice. "Err...let's go then," he said. "Just like we practiced, right?"

By the smirk on his face, Mike could tell that Snake was rolling his eyes behind his sunglasses as he pushed open the rear doors, letting in a gust of late winter air. He jumped out of the van, boots crunching slightly on gravel, and soon disappeared into the woods, heading, as they'd agreed, towards the front gate and the mansion's small detail of private security guards.

They waited for a minute, giving Snake a head start. Michelangelo felt itchy inside and out - from the snug thermal jacket, size XXL to fit over his shell, and from the *off-ness* of being on a ninja strike team that wasn't his own. Running with his brothers was like breathing, something that operated almost below consciousness. Being in this van with the glow of the computer screen and the two humans putting on their gear, felt, not *bad* exactly, but unnatural, like handling chopsticks with one's left hand. He pulled himself together. *What would Leo do?* Leo would be calm, focused and in control.

Michelangelo stepped silently out of the van, and paused, a tingle of suspicion pricking at the edge of his senses as he reached them into the surrounding darkness. Tami and Ren hopped out after him, and still on edge, Mike signaled for them to fan out to either side as the three of them approached the back of the estate. Simon would stay in the van, clearing a path for them through the security system and acting as communications hub. As they neared the wall, his voice came through the earpiece that Michelangelo had secured under his mask. "Snake's there. I've taken perimeter cameras down, motion detectors down. You've got five minutes."

Now , Mike signaled and the three ninjas rappelled up and over the brick wall, like invaders over a castle battlement, dropping down off the last few feet of their lines to land noiselessly on the other side.

They ran on light feet through more than an acre of woodland, until they came to a shallow ravine, on the other side of which wound a garden pathway that encircled a broad expanse of lawn surrounding the mansion itself, coming into view now as a ghostly white Greek-revival structure with soaring white columns extending around the side of the building like a contingent of sentinels. Mike adjusted his pace, consciously checking Ren and Tami's position as he judged how best to approach. They were still several yards away when a cacophony of loud barking went up. He caught Tami's look of alarm; they hadn't known about the dogs. "Get ready peeps, here we go," Mike shouted, as three massive Rottweilers burst into sight.

The dogs came straight at them, black, muscled beasts tearing across the green lawn, lips curled back, lines of grey-pink gums bulging over rows of teeth as stark white as the mansion itself. Michelangelo felt a flood of adrenalin carry him into a state of hyper-awareness and distorted time. A number of thoughts flashed through his head in a nanosecond. Fending off vicious attack dogs would be nothing like fighting a person. His brothers were not here; a couple of Rising Hand ninjas might be the only ones to witness him being torn apart by three sets of teeth. And although he doubted they felt the same obligation to him, he couldn't just let Ren and Tami fall under those frothing jaws.

The worst thing any of them could do was run away. Mike ran towards the lead dog, throwing his arm up in front of his face as it launched itself at him. The bared fangs went for Mike's forearm and he whipped it up over his head as he let himself fall backwards onto his shell, seeing the dog, jaws reaching, sail over him as he planted a solid overhead kick into the animal's underside. He had barely rolled to his feet and drawn his nunchuks before it was coming at him again, leaping up into the air, then suddenly crashing to the ground, collapsing with a short whine. A second dog took its place

and Mike's nunchuku smacked it hard, across the muzzle and on top of the head. It shook itself, dazed, as the third dog leapt on him from behind, jaws scraping to find purchase on his shell, all eighty pounds of barreling canine slamming him to the ground. He tucked his head down, protecting his throat, reaching for the animal's neck and bracing himself to feel fangs tearing into flesh. Instead, he felt only dead weight. The dog had stopped moving.

He rolled it carefully off of himself and stood. All three dogs lay motionless on the ground, jaws gaping, slender darts protruding from necks or shoulders.

"Are they-?" Mike asked anxiously.

"No. It'll wear off," Tami said, jogging up.

"That was insane!" Ren exclaimed. "You ran straight at them!"

"'Insane' would be the right word," Mike agreed weakly.

"Where are you guys?" Simon's voice came through their earpieces. "I've knocked out the house cameras and jammed the door and window alarms, so get a move on!"

They covered the rest of the lawn at a sprint, clambering over the low rock wall behind the house. Breaking the lock on the patio door across from the covered swimming pool led them into a personal gym where the hulking shapes of treadmills and weight machines cast odd-shaped shadows on the walls. They cut through the room, emerged into a marble-floored hallway and, following their memory of the blueprints, quickly located the stairs leading down into the basement. At the bottom of the steps was an opulent entertainment room and library, with a big screen television, mini-bar, sectional sofas and wall-to-ceiling bookshelves. They split up, pulling on shelves, until one of them swung aside for Tami, revealing the wall safe behind it.

"Have at it," Tami said, stepping aside.

Ren leaned in close and spun the combination lock with steady fingers, a look of intense concentration on his face. *He's done this before,* Mike noted. Long minutes passed before the teen delicately nudged the last number into place and pulled the steel door open, punching the air in victory. Tami held open a zippered nylon bag as Ren reached into the safe and pulled out a thick manila envelope, a small black notebook, and two USB sticks. He dropped them in, then looked longingly at what remained: two jewelry boxes and several stacks of bound hundred-dollar bills, but Tami said sharply, "We're here on an assignment, not a burglary." She slung the bag over her shoulder and shut the safe, pushing the bookshelf back into place.

The shriek of the triggered alarm was so sudden that for a full second none of them moved. Then Mike saw the heavy steel door dropping down over the entrance to the room, sealing them in, and with no time to think, he threw himself under it, bracing against the frame of the entryway. The door slammed into him, punching the breath from his body as the impact shot through shell, bone, spine and ribs, the sudden weight dropping him to elbows and knees.

"Shit!" he heard Ren, nearby, and Simon, through the earpiece, shout at the same time. Simon's voice continued in a frenetic jumble, "There's a secondary system that was just triggered- you guys need to get out now!"

"You heard him!" Mike yelled, his voice contorted with strain. His arms and legs were trembling under the weight of the door he was holding up with his shell. Elbow over elbow, on her belly, Tami crawled under the door through the space he'd created, and Ren followed right after her. Once they were through, Ren asked, "Now how do we get him out?" If Mike moved, the door would flatten him. He thought he could feel the bony plates of his carapace grinding and buckling, pulling his ribs apart, and imagined that having one's shell crushed must be the worst way for a turtle to go.

"Ain't this funny," Snake's voice came from somewhere near the top of the stairs. "Dammit Snake, give us a hand," Ren said, and a couple seconds later, Mike felt the weight of the door lift for a

moment, just long enough for him to roll away from it before the three humans let it go and it thudded into the floor with resounding finality.

Mike got to his feet unsteadily, arms clutching his sides. "Let's move," he said.

"No need to hurry, coach," Snake called, as they raced out of the house. "There were only three guards." The mansion's long front driveway curved down a gradual slope to the iron gates, which hung open. Sprawled on the ground near the gates were the prone figures of three men. Snake's job had been to distract them; he'd done considerably more. They rushed past too quickly for Mike to tell if the guards were dead or unconscious.

The white van with green lettering sped into view, pulling up to them as they tore off of the property, Snake leading, Ren and Tami flanking, Mike bringing up the rear. As Snake yanked the rear doors open, Mike's gaze flicked over to the dark copse of trees to their left, certain, for a second, that he'd sensed...something. Breath? Movement? It was gone. He jumped into the van behind Tami and pulled the doors shut.

"Whooo-eee," Simon exclaimed, navigating the van back to the street and merging into regular traffic. "That was *intense.* "

Tami pulled off her mask, tousling her blue hair and patting the black nylon bag next to her. "A couple tough spots, but nothing we couldn't handle." She looked over at Mike with an arched eyebrow. "So? What did you think?"

Michelangelo didn't rightly know what he felt: relief and exuberance, guilt and confusion, camaraderie and separateness, all at the same time. He said, honestly, "I think that was the work of a pretty damn good squad."

She grinned, then, and he found himself grinning back. Even Snake was caught up in the spirit. "Hel-lo, payday," he drawled, leaning

back with his hands laced behind his neck.

"After we get back to HQ, we ought to celebrate," Simon called from the front. "My favorite bar, Chuck's, isn't far, just over on Seventh and-"

"But we can't take Mike in there," Ren interrupted.

It was still a little startling to hear them use his name. For the first several weeks, it had seemed as if they couldn't quite wrap their heads around the idea of referring to him by a human name, especially one as disarmingly everyman as 'Mike.' "That's okay," he said now, filling the awkward moment of silence, "You guys go. You deserve it. Really."

Tami said, "Let's get some take-out and beer and hang out in the team room." It was nice, seeing her face relaxed and without suspicion. "That way the whole squad can be there."

"Aggghh, nooooo...noooo, wipe out!" Michelangelo dropped to his knees and shook his fists at the screen as his race car careened out of control, off a bridge and into the water. He handed the controller to Ren with a mock-despondent sigh. "So, so close. I've never been beaten before." Well, to be fair, he'd never played anyone except this brothers before. "Beer will surely improve my driving," he jested as went to the back of the room and dug into the mini-fridge.

He leaned with his elbows resting on the back of the sofa, nursing a bottle, half-watching Ren and Simon's game. He knew he should have left by now, but he didn't relish the long, demoralizing journey home and the cool non-reception that would be waiting for him at the end of it. With each minute that passed, he relished it less and less.

Tami came through the door and he watched her cross the room, help herself to a slice of pizza and grab a drink from the fridge. She noticed his eyes on her and came over to join him behind the sofa.

"So," he said, "assignment H054 is all tied up?"

She nodded, swallowing a mouthful of food. "I passed the contents of the safe to Doshida-san five minutes ago. He congratulated us." She held up her bottle and he clinked it, made vaguely uneasy by her unabashed pride.

"What do you think it was? That we got out of the safe?"

"If I had to guess? Documents that implicate important people, like politicians or businessmen, people who secretly do big business with the criminal underworld." She shrugged. "But that's just a guess. It's none of our business."

Snake, standing by himself at the back of the room, set his empty drink down and pulled on his heavy leather jacket, heading for the door without so much as a word of parting. "Snake." Mike raised his bottle in the man's direction.

"Coach." The way he said the word, with the 'o' drawn out, always made it sound amply padded with condescension, the way a person might refer to the lowest class of airline service: "Oh, you're flying *coach* ." He disappeared into the corridor.

Tami made a noise of irritation. "Don't mind him," she said.

"I don't."

"Good. 'Cause *I* think you're alright." She said this without looking at him, watching the racecars on the screen instead.

He studied her profile, surprised by how pleased he felt. "Thanks," he said sincerely. After a minute, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Depends on what it is."

"How did you become a ninja? You don't look very Japanese."

She turned towards him now, some of the suspicion back in her eyes, but after a long pause, she sighed and said, "My father was a half-Japanese Foot soldier. Oruku Saki allowed for such people at the lower ranks, but not the higher ones. So my dad never rose; he only ever made enough money for us to live on. He tried to hold down a day job, but the Foot frown on that kind of thing. After my mom left, he started training me." She shook her head scornfully. "Pointless, really. He knew I didn't have enough Japanese blood for the Foot to ever accept me."

Her last words were nearly drowned out by Simon and Ren's shouting as the game reached some critical moment. Mike nodded towards the engrossed video game players. "How about Ren? Did he come from a Foot family as well?"

Tami lowered her voice, so as not to be heard over the sound of cars tearing down imaginary tracks. "No, I'm guessing his dad was some deadbeat military serviceman. Ren's great-uncle is a local boss of the Yamaguchi-gumi in New York; he was the only one who'd take Ren's mother in. He tried to keep Ren out of trouble by training him alongside his own son- tall guy, on another squad here at Agete."

Mike nodded, thoughtful. He'd been raised a ninja; it had never been a choice. He'd rarely stopped to consider that for most humans, there were other paths, and the men he fought had stories and reasons for being what they were. He said to Tami, "But both of you somehow found your way to the Rising Hand, along with people like Simon, and Snake."

Tami nodded. "Saito is a visionary," she said with fervent conviction. *'Saito'* , he noted, not *'Doshida-san'* , as she'd always been careful to call him before. "You know, he's actually blue-blood Foot. The problem was that Oruku Saki didn't place much value on the Doshida family expertise with poisons; he only cared about swelling the ranks of his fighters."

Michelangelo suppressed a shudder. He knew that well enough.

"So Saito started finding other customers. At first, the Shredder overlooked it, but a Foot soldier's life and livelihood are owned by the Clan- you don't take your cut until those above you have had theirs, and you don't go outside the Clan without permission. So when the side business started doing too well, Saki ordered him to stop."

"He refused, obviously," Mike finished.

There was a knock on the door and Ren exclaimed, "Oh, crap, I'm late," as he grabbed his bag and jacket, throwing an apologetic wave to all of them. "Rematch, later," he promised, pointing at Mike as he rushed out. Mike caught a glimpse of the friend, Ren's second-cousin, waiting in the hall. Simon turned off the video game and said, "Well, I'm heading out too."

When Simon had gone, Tami dropped down onto the sofa with a tired, but satisfied, groan, looking up at Mike as if surprised to see him still here. "Thank you. For getting us out of there tonight." She hesitated. "It looked like... it hurt."

Mike finished his beer and set aside the bottle. Slowly, he lowered himself onto the other side of the sofa. He could read her expression as she looked at him, at his face, his shell, his skin, his fingers and his toes, and he knew she was thinking about how very strange he was. It wasn't a comfortable feeling, being on the receiving end of such naked scrutiny. "We do have feeling in our shells," he explained. "Not nearly as much, but there are nerves and blood in there."

Tentatively, skeptically, she put a hand on his shell. "So you can feel this."

"Sure. I can feel the pressure, I can tell there's five fingers. I can't really feel how warm or cold your hand is, but it you stabbed me in the shell it would hurt."

She pulled her hand away. "It must be lonely, being so very different."

Mike considered her words. "Maybe a little, but...not really. I do have brothers." And just like that, it hit him: how much he'd been delaying going home, not wanting to be reminded of the strain he'd created, but also because, as hard as it was to believe and admit, he'd been having too much fun, playing video games and having beer and pizza with humans, with Saito Doshida's people, while his family waited and worried. He stood up, sick with guilt. It would be nearly dawn by the time he got home. "I'd better go." To soften his abrupt leave-taking he added, "Takes a long time to hail a blind cabbie."

He was rewarded with snort of amusement and a half-smile. "Later, then."

As he left the team room, he paused halfway down the stairs. Snake was leaving Saito Doshida's office. He didn't see Michelangelo as he turned and strode in the opposite direction, a small silver metal box tucked under one arm. Mike waited until the man was out of sight before he continued down the steps, his mouth now forming a pensive line. After two months, Snake was still an enigma. And it wasn't just his disdainful aloofness, or his deliberately intimidating personal quirks that Mike didn't understand or care for.

He's hiding something. Something big. Michelangelo was sure of it.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

The garage door was wide open, an invitation, if Raphael ever saw one, to slip in and stand right behind the man cussing over the suspension system of his motorbike.

"BOO!"

Casey Jones leapt straight up and dropped his wrench. It bounced end over end, clanging loudly on the concrete floor. "I've *told* you not to do that, ya prick!" Casey coiled his fist back threateningly, but couldn't keep a straight face at the sight of the turtle bent over, laughing.

"Man, you're getting soft," Raphael wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. "Must be the romantic Spanish vacations."

Casey found a rag and wiped his greasy hands on it. The rag looked like it added back as much grease as it removed. "Looks like *you're* feeling better," he huffed.

The corners of Raphael's mouth turned down for a second, then he snapped them back up into his trademark lopsided smirk. "Yeah, well, I thought I'd go for a little stroll. Through a few dark alleys. You game?"

Casey hesitated. "Well," he said slowly, "April *is* out with her sister..."

"C'mon, it's for my health, man. My *mental* health."

"No question you need more of that," Casey agreed, grabbing his leather jacket, mask, and hockey stick from a disorganized pile of stuff in the corner in his garage.

The great thing about New York, Raphael thought, was that a hunchback in a trench coat and a man carrying a hockey stick didn't have to walk very far in any direction to reach the sort of place where they didn't stick out as more weird than usual. After a few minutes they reached a stretch of street with more than a few lights knocked out, no tourists in sight, and an unspoken rule against eye contact for anyone who wanted to avoid attracting the wrong sort of attention. Raphael's kind of place.

He pulled a small phone from the holster on his belt and looked at it. The screen displayed only a street grid, with one pulsing blue dot. *The hell's he been doing there so long?*

Casey said, "New phone?"

Raphael stowed it away. "Something Don refurbed."

"So..." Casey started casually, "how're the guys?"

He was saved from answering right away; they passed a loud posse of transvestite hookers in some sort of quarrel with the muscled bouncers behind a seedy dive of a bar. Raphael glared at the ground. He'd sought Casey out to get away from his worries, not to dwell on them. "They're fine. Sorta." After a moment, "April tell you?"

"Yeah." Casey ran a hand through his hair, looking at his mutant friend with real concern. "Are you, err... gonna be alright?"

"It's not me you've gotta worry about," Raphael fumed under his breath.

Across the street, two women in fishnet stockings, red leather mini-skirts, and tube top corsets were in an escalating argument with a man with a shaved head and gold rings too large for his small hands. Raphael narrowed his eyes at the scene, slowing.

Something suddenly put the man over the edge. He grabbed one of the women by the throat and shoved her backwards. As she

stumbled over her six-inch stilettos and crashed to the pavement, her friend began shrieking wildly, clawing at the man's face. He hit her in the mouth before turning back to the first woman and kicking her as she curled up in a sobbing ball.

"Hey dipshit!"

Raphael had already taken two steps forward and he paused, confused. That wasn't Casey's voice. It had come from one of the two men who'd appeared around the corner, both clad in black except for the red symbol on their headbands. Raphael froze, then melted back into shadow on his side of the street.

"Who the hell are you?" the man with the shaved head demanded.

"The landlords," the taller of the black-clad men said. "You do business here, you pay rent."

The enraged pimp kicked the woman on the ground one more time for good measure, then put his face very close to that of the man who'd spoken. "Fuck you."

He never saw it coming. Raphael did, though. Three wicked-fast pressure point strikes and the man went to the ground, gasping with his head bent over his knees in a comical imitation of a kowtow. "That's better," said the shorter of the men in black. "That is the proper respect to show to the Foot Clan."

His fellow soldier said, "We do not like to have noise and trouble in our territory from scumbags such as yourself. Next time we see you, you behave nice and pay twenty percent rent. You get it?"

The pimp deflated at the feet of stronger men. "But this street's always been neutral between the gangs," he whined.

"Not anymore." One of the soldiers put a foot against the man's shoulder and shoved him over. The two women clambered to their

feet, clothes disheveled, hanging onto each other as they ran away, stumbling in their high heels.

Raphael could barely believe it. First Foot Clan sighting in months, and here they were, staking out new ground with gusto. He felt a rush of heat go to his head. His hands went for his sai. Only two men.

"So nice to run into old friends," Casey said, and pulled his hockey mask over his face. Raphael's phone vibrated. Casey took a step forward.

"Hold it." Raphael pulled him back.

"Huh? Why?"

Raphael took out his phone. The blue dot was moving, traveling slowly across the screen.

"You're looking at your *phone* ?" Casey exclaimed.

"Shut up, let me think about this," he muttered. He felt as though he were trying to hear something, a voice speaking in a deafening snowstorm. The two Foot soldiers began walking away, leaving their victim still lying on the sidewalk.

"They're leaving," Casey urged.

Raphael watched the backs of the two men disappear down the street. He felt like a painfully stretched elastic, his voice a forced, uncharacteristic monotone. "We're not gonna touch the Foot."

Casey stared at him in disbelief. "Excuse me?"

Raphael started walking back, quickly, with long, angry strides that Casey had to hustle to match. Biting the words out through a tight jaw, he said, "I can't have them paying attention to us. Not with Mike hanging around Foot Traitor Number One. I don't know what game

Doshida's playing, but he's up to something." He scowled. "Who knows...might be good to keep the Foot around."

"Did you really just say that? Or am I losing my mind?" Casey pulled his mask off and walked with him for several minutes. "Err, where are we going?"

"I have to get back." He stopped and faced his friend. "Look, sorry 'bout this. Next time I'll bring over a movie or something." He started walking again, calling over shoulder, "Maybe you and April ought to stay away for a little while. Just in case."

He caught Casey's muttered reply. "You know by now we can't do that."

Michelangelo had a snippet of some TV show theme song stuck in his head and was whistling it, absently rolling one of his nunchuku back and forth around his wrist, as he came up on the entrance to the lair. With a start, he noticed Raphael sitting outside, his shell against the tunnel wall, brooding over the thin stream of dark water that, fed by the recent spring rain, was winding its way hypnotically past their front door.

"Hey Raph. What're you-"

"Doshida's getting his money's worth out of you, don't'cha think?" Raphael stood and came up to him. "What took you so long?"

Mike blinked at the unexpected ambush. "Just working on stuff with the team."

"So they're the *team* now, are they?"

Michelangelo smiled to cover his embarrassment. He put a hand on Raphael's shoulder. "It'll be over soon. One more week, one more job, and I'm done." He pulled back to look at his brother, strong and healthy again, though unsmiling. "It was worth it, wasn't it?"

Raphael set his jaw. "You don't know that yet."

Mike exhaled slowly, knowing that nothing he said could really reassure or explain, but feeling the need to try anyways. "These people, Raph... they're not like the Foot. They don't hate us out of vengeance, or honor, or blood feud. Not every ninja in the city has to be an enemy, right? I guess what I'm saying is, well, maybe... things could be different."

Like a judge who'd just heard a remorseful but damning confession, Raphael regarded Mike with an expression not without compassion, yet still devoid of mercy. "They're human. They're ninja. And they are *not* your friends. Just remember that."

Raphael turned and went into the lair, not waiting for Mike to follow.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

"Snake's not coming," Tami said as she came into the team room. "He's been put on a different assignment."

"What?" Ren was indignant. "How's that? Everyone's assigned to one team around here."

"This is different. I'll explain later." She turned to Mike. "But we're sticking to the mission plan, so let's get going."

Michelangelo nodded. Snake's absence made him curious, he was also more than a little grateful. His suspicion that there was more going on with Snake than he let on was as strong as ever, but it would no longer concern him after tonight. After tonight, he would have fulfilled his side of the bargain with Saito Doshida. Raphael was healthy again, no one had tried to kill him or hurt his family, and he was even, he dared admit, pleased with the work he'd done. After tonight, he could feel relief. He just needed everything to go smoothly.

They left the building on foot, Michelangelo leading the way for about a quarter mile before stopping at a sewer grate behind a couple of quietly hulking shipping buildings. No one in sight. He lifted the grate and said, "Okay, who's first?"

Ren, Tami and Simon looked at each other nervously. "I'll go," Ren said. He crouched down and lowered himself gingerly over the side of the opening.

"Don't worry," Mike told him. "The drop is only a few feet, and it's flat at the bottom. Might be a little wet, though. Just step out of the way and wait for me."

Ren nodded, though he clung to the pavement with his forearms for several more seconds before taking a breath and letting himself fall.

They heard a splash at the bottom. "You okay?" Tami called.

"Yeah," Ren voice echoed up to them. "You can come down."

Tami went next, sitting on the edge and jumping in right away, as if to get it over with before she could think better of the idea. Simon looked a little terrified; Mike made a face when he felt the sweatiness of the man's armpits as he lowered him to Ren and Tami. When all three of them were down, Mike leapt into the hole in one smooth, practiced motion, pulling the grate into place behind him and landing in a crouch at the bottom. He straightened up, grinning at the pale human faces around him. "See, not so bad, right?"

"Right," Ren echoed, unconvinced.

"Have I mentioned that I'm mildly claustrophobic?" Simon whispered.

"Onward then," Mike said cheerfully. He led the way down the tunnel, toward endless darkness. His eyes had already adjusted. Even without light from the street grate he could find his way. "Stay close together. It'll take about thirty minutes to get there." He looked over his shoulder at the three humans, their hands held out in front of them, shuffling tentatively after him. "Well, maybe forty," he amended. "Plenty of time for me to tell you some of my stories of sewer monsters."

"That's not funny," Tami said.

"I'll tell you what's not funny... the flesh-eating rats that grow to be-"

"Quit it!"

Mike chuckled, though he didn't like this situation any more than the others did, for different reasons. Assignment G102 made him decidedly uneasy, though he wasn't about to refuse it and draw out

his engagement any longer. On first consideration, it had seemed like such a straightforward espionage task that Mike wondered why Doshida would assign Roku Squad to it. Surely he didn't need a ninja turtle to steal some files. Until he realized that clearly the best way to get into their target building tonight was through the sewer system.

"You sure you know your way around this maze?" Ren asked.

"Trust me," Mike assured him. "I spend a lot of time down here."

"Do you really *live* down here, like they say?" He shuddered. "I don't see how. I mean, there's no light, no heat, nothing. Where do you sleep? What do you eat? Wouldn't you just go insane?"

No doubt they were just innocent questions from someone completely unused to being underground. Still, Mike's guard went up and he felt a rising defensiveness. He wished, impossibly, that he could show them the lair so they could see that it was, if not as luxurious as a proper house, at least a habitable and comfortable place to live. He had a few things to say about how Splinter had always made sure they lived like people, not animals. He wanted to tell them that Don worked his tail off to maintain their home, that they all had chores, that he enjoyed cooking family meals.

Instead he said, "We have our ways. If this was all there was down here, don't you think I'd just be a grunting, drooling, starving monster, like this? Bhhhwwaarrghh..." he made a ghoulish face and flicked a pen light on underneath his chin.

Ren stumbled backwards. Simon screamed and jumped into Tami. They lost a full two minutes during which he promised them he wouldn't do anything like that again.

Finally, they stopped. Mike said, "We're here."

Simon looked up at the sewer grate skeptically. "How do you know? It looks the same as the other one."

Mike shook his head. "So little faith." He took two running paces and leapt up to the grate, grabbing onto it and hanging like a gymnast from one of its two sections. Swinging his legs up and slamming his heels into the opposite corner, he loosened the other section and slid it aside. He waited several seconds before lifting himself up slowly, holding a chin-up position as he turned his head, surveying. Satisfied, he tucked his legs and hauled himself up through the opening, rolling aside when he felt the ground.

He reached down and helped the others up, one at a time. They were standing in an underground parking lot. It was empty, except for one old dust-covered car that appeared to be parked there permanently. Dim florescent lights cast a yellowish glow on the grey concrete walls, floor and support pillars.

"Wow," Ren said. "We're actually in."

They took the stairwell up to the main floor. The door at the top was locked but not alarmed. It only took a few minutes to pick it open. Once they were through, they walked past a set of elevators into the unlit lobby of the building. In the gloom, they could make out waiting room chairs, tables with magazines, a directory board, and a long receptionist's desk, behind which lay the doorway to an office with computers and tall file cabinets.

"Okay," Tami said to Simon. "Get to work."

Simon went around to the office and they followed him. He turned on one of the desktop computers and pulled his own laptop out of his backpack. "Give me some time," he said. "Once I get into their network, it'll take a while to copy everything over."

Tami sent Ren to stand guard on the other side of the floor. She and Michelangelo took position behind the receptionist's desk, keeping an eye on the front entrance and the elevators.

After a couple of minutes, Michelangelo couldn't hold in his discomfort. "Doesn't this bother you?"

"What?"

"Stealing information from a healthcare company. Who would want to do that?"

"Most likely a rival company."

"But... you don't know what they're going to use the information for."

"No. That's their business."

"But it doesn't bother you."

She looked at him, expressionless in the dark. "If you sell someone a butcher knife, do you know what they're going to do with it? For someone that's not even human, you have a lot of moral qualms."

Mike hadn't thought of it that way. "I suppose so," he said.

"This is a living for us," she said tersely. "One that pays well. Maybe you can't appreciate that because you're not a part of society."

"Hey, where'd that come from?" he asked, stung. "What did I say? I didn't mean-"

"You didn't have to say anything. You're leaving, aren't you? After tonight."

"That was the plan from the beginning. Only three months." He sighed and added, "'Cause you're right, I'm not a part of society. But I *can* appreciate what you're saying. I needed the pay too. To help a family member."

She was silent for a minute. "Must be nice," she said.

"What?"

"Having family." She made a face. "Society isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Simon came out of the office, zipping up his bag. "Got it," he said.

"Get Ren back over here," Tami said. "Let's wipe down everything we've touched and go." Michelangelo led them on a different return route. Bringing the squad underground felt like inviting them a little too close to home. They weren't anywhere near the lair, but just to be safe, he'd make sure they couldn't recreate their journey if they tried.

Watching them stumble along in the dark, he felt a bit guilty about it. Tami, Ren, Simon- he couldn't help but admit that he liked working with them. They were hard-working, good at what they did, and they had even, despite being skeptical, accepted him and been willing to learn from him. They were all right. He'd known so few people in his life...despite everything, he just couldn't bring himself to regret having met these ones.

"Thank God," Simon muttered, to Ren and Tami's whole-hearted agreement when they finally emerged into the open air, right where they'd begun.

"That was a cinch," Ren declared as they walked back to Agete's headquarters. "Thanks to you," he added to Mike.

"So this is it, huh?" Simon said. "You're really done?"

"Yeah. This is it." Mike turned to face them as they entered the building. "Hey, look, I know it wasn't long, but...well, good luck." He held his hand out to Ren and then Simon. Neither of them hesitated in taking it, as they had three months ago. He smiled at Tami. She returned it faintly, nodded at him once, then led the other two down the hall and out of sight.

Michelangelo stood in the empty hallway, feeling strangely high and let down at the same time. He walked down the corridor and turned into Saito Doshida's office. The man was the same as he'd been when Mike had walked in the first time, sitting at his desk, this time looking at something on his computer screen.

"Has it been three months already?" he asked, glancing up. There it was- that small, sly, calculating smile. "I don't suppose I could persuade you to stay on."

Mike shook his head. "No, thanks."

"A shame. Your work with Roku Squad has been very valuable. I intend to apply much of it to the rest of Agete." He swiveled his computer monitor around so that Mike could see the screen. There was a video playing, the sound muted. It took him a second to realize what it was. A scene from the training area. Tami and Ren making their way through the urban mock-up, Snake following behind. And there he was, on camera, moving across the frame, gesturing, speaking with the squad.

Michelangelo stared at the screen in horror. "You recorded all of it."

"The other squads won't have quite the same experience, but at least they'll benefit."

Mike considered grabbing the computer and smashing it against the wall. But he was certain that Doshida would have backup copies.

"Don't worry," Doshida said, reading his face. "Do you think that it would be in my interest for these videos to become public? They are completely safe with me." He stopped the video and swiveled the monitor back. "After all, we're on good terms now."

"Your terms," Mike amended for him. Of course, he thought. Of course the man would find some way to ensure he had the upper hand, now and in the unforeseeable future.

"I haven't forgotten the other half of your payment. It'll be delivered tonight." He stood up and came around his desk, stopping in front of Michelangelo. "I hope this arrangement has worked out for you as well as it has for me." He smiled. "I'm sure you must have had to deal with some... disagreement... from certain family members."

Michelangelo found it in himself to smile back- not his typical smile, but one that Raphael might understand, one that accompanied the wishful thought of punching the man in the face. "Enjoy the videos." He walked out of Saito Doshida's office.

Though he felt ready to bolt from the building, on a final whim, he climbed the stairs to the team room. He'd spent enough hours there that he figured he'd have one last look. Maybe he'd find Snake. He thought he ought to at least say a word of parting to the man, even though they'd only ever managed to maintain a mutual tolerance.

But the team room was empty. He took a soda out of the mini-fridge and drank it as he walked slowly around the room, so familiar to him now, but a place he expected never to return to. He wasn't sure what to make of his conflicted feelings. Saito Doshida was a hair shy of an enemy, but Roku Squad had been his squad, for a while.

Something caught his eye: a file folder on the desk. The corner of a photograph was poking out of it. Curious, he opened the folder. Inside were three eight-by-ten inch color photographs. Each photo was the face of a person; there were two men and one woman. The images were slightly grainy, as if enlarged and cropped from shots taken from a distance, and the subjects were not smiling or looking into the camera; they didn't know they were being photographed. Each sheet had two small lines of text printed in the white margin of the top right hand corner: the subject's name and a code. K075, K076 and K077.

He looked more closely at the photograph of the woman. She was young, early twenties he guessed. The wind had whipped a few strands of her wavy, reddish-brown hair across her face. Large, serious blue eyes with long lashes were looking at something in the distance- perhaps someone she recognized, or maybe a taxi or street sign. He flipped the photo over. On the back was a street address written in a ballpoint pen.

Michelangelo suddenly felt sick.

The team room door opened. He dropped the photograph on the desk as Tami walked in. "You're still here?" she asked, surprised, but with a pleased undertone. She saw the photographs on the desk and frowned, walking over and shoving them back into the file folder. "He should know not to leave these lying around, even if it is our team room."

"Who?"

"Snake, of course."

"These are his...assignments?"

"That's why he wasn't with us tonight. Finally got his big break. It's what he wanted to do, you know, before he was kicked out of the military. You could tell he didn't ever really want to be on our squad, he was just biding time, hoping to become a K man." She snorted in annoyance. "Suits him better, though. K missions are the only ones handled solo." She slipped the folder into a drawer and turned to Mike with raised eyebrows. "So? Have you decided to stay, then?"

"What?" Michelangelo tore his eyes from the drawer that the file folder had disappeared into. "Uh, no...no, I just came up here to have a last look and make sure I didn't leave anything..." He realized how ridiculous that sounded. "...And to say good-bye."

He saw the trace of hopefulness in her face harden into understanding. "I see," she said.

Mike shifted from foot to foot, wanting to say more, but instead blurting, "I have to go. I'm sorry."

He hurried to the door, aware of the resentful glare boring into his shell as he left the room. He could still feel it as he rushed out of the building, into the night and began to run.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

It took Michelangelo fifty minutes to get there. He lost five minutes when he jumped off the subway train one stop too soon, (such an easy mistake, he bemoaned, for someone unable to wait to see the station signs), but he made up a little time after that by taking to the rooftops, running fast, still maintaining enough control to make precise jumps and climbs. He could only hope he wasn't too late.

When he finally crouched on the rooftop next to the four-story apartment building that bore the address he was looking for, he gave himself a couple of minutes to recover, slowing his breath and heart rate as he studied the dark squares of glass. There was no way to tell from the outside how the apartments were arranged and which window belonged to unit 408.

He rappelled over to the building's roof, counted to the eighth balcony on the east side, and dropped down onto it silently. He pressed himself against the wall, concentrating hard, but sensed no noise or movement from inside the dark apartment. The sliding door presumably led into the bedroom, but it was obscured by heavy blinds. Carefully, he edged over to the window and looked in, shielding his eyes from the glare of the city lights. He could make out the outlines of the kitchen- the fridge, the stove and a counter littered with takeout containers. He could see very little of the main living area beyond the kitchen, but he could tell it was a mess: clothes tossed over the back of a sofa, a small TV, a coffee table cluttered with cans. The walls were bare. Mike admitted that he knew very few women, but he suspected one did not live here.

He climbed back up to the roof and counted off eight balconies on the west side. He was getting nervous. What he was doing might be futile and ridiculous. The balcony he dropped onto this time was also dark, but the blinds were not drawn and he saw right away that the

single bed in the bedroom lay empty. He also glimpsed a half-open closet full of clothes and a dresser upon which sat a clock, some photo frames and little objects that looked like the sorts of things he'd seen strewn on April's bathroom counter. He tried the balcony door. It was locked. The window, however, was not. He slid it open, popped the screen out and climbed in, maneuvering himself awkwardly but silently over the sink to get to the floor. He held motionless for a second, scanning with all his senses, then straightened up, confident he was alone.

He walked through the kitchen. There was a calendar on the freezer door. He put his face close enough to read it in the dark. *Call Schedule.* It had a bunch of codes and numbers he didn't understand, but the circled dates seemed self-explanatory. Today's date was one of them.

The living area was tidy, too tidy, as if it was rarely used. There was a bookshelf filled with big binders and textbooks, and a framed diploma on the wall. He stepped into the bedroom and squatted down to look at the photographs on the dresser.

Mike sucked in a breath. The terrible suspicion he'd been carrying for over the last hour burst into reality like shattering ice. With trembling fingers he slid the photo out of the frame and pocketed it in his belt. Then he went to work.

He closed the blinds in both the bedroom and kitchen. He pulled a standing lamp over to the front door and turned it on. It cast a yellow pool of light on the carpet. He found a pen and a pad of notepaper in one of the kitchen drawers, wrote a short note, and placed it on the floor, directly in the circle of light, where it could not be missed.

He climbed back out of the kitchen window. Before he replaced the screen and slid the glass shut, he shoved a section of the blinds aside, creating a small crack through which he had an unobstructed view of the apartment's front door. Then he froze into place, calling upon his ninjitsu training to render himself utterly motionless. Only

his eyes moved, alternately scanning the street below, the rooftops nearby and the apartment inside.

Time passed. It must be past four a.m. by now. He began to doubt what he was doing. Nothing was happening. It was still early spring and the night, if not dangerously cold, was not warm either. He had the physical and mental training to be able to override the need to fidget or shift, but he had also had a long, exhausting night. Fighting to keep his eyelids and chin from drooping, he imagined he was in one of those childhood contests that Master Splinter would engineer for him and his brothers to test who could remain absolutely still for the longest time. He'd never been the best at those.

Just as he was beginning to be sure he'd made some mistake, he saw the light in the apartment shift as the front door opened and the woman from the photograph stepped through the doorway. She was tall, a little pale, and tired-looking as she was, even prettier in person. She stopped when she saw the lit lamp in her path. Her purse dropped to the floor as she stooped to pick up the note. Mike didn't dare to breathe. As she straightened up, the lamp shade partly obscured the view of her face, so he couldn't see her expression, but her whole body stiffened in alarm. She craned her neck, eyes sweeping around the shadowy apartment fearfully. They lighted briefly on the kitchen window and even though Mike knew there was no way she could see him, he resisted the urge to draw away from the glass. Her hands shook as she grabbed her purse and backed out into the hallway, pulling the front door closed.

Michelangelo kept his eyes on the street in front of the building. After a couple of minutes, he spotted the woman's white coat as she emerged onto the sidewalk, ran to the corner of the street and hailed a cab. When the taxi she climbed into disappeared around a corner, Mike let out his breath. He stood, slowly, working feeling back into each of his stiff, cold fingers and toes. He scanned the rooftops and the street one more time. That's when he saw Snake.

Even from four stories up, Mike picked him out by the telltale sunglasses. Why the man wore them even at night was

incomprehensible. Snake was standing on the corner of the street across from the apartment, studying the dark windows as Michelangelo had done only a short while ago. Mike dropped back into a crouch below the level of the balcony railing, unsure if he'd been spotted from a distance. Through the vertical metal stiles, he watched Snake cross the street and walk along the side of the building, passing almost directly underneath. The man went around the corner into the alley behind the apartment and Mike heard boots on the fire escape ladder.

Michelangelo moved. He latched his grappling hook around the balcony railing and vaulted over it, grabbing hold of the line and letting himself drop over the side, checking his descent by pushing off the balconies on each floor as he fell. He landed noiselessly, retracted his line, and ran towards the fire escape ladder. "Snake!" he shouted.

The figure clinging to the ladder one floor up stopped and looked down. His face registered surprise, then the corners of his mouth lifted in amused incredulity.

Mike shook his head. "Don't do it."

Snake let go and dropped several feet, his boots thudding on concrete as he landed in a crouch. He tugged his black leather jacket straight as he stood. "Why, *coach,* " he drawled, "I thought tonight was your last night with us."

"It was," Mike said. "Though this wasn't the way I'd hoped to leave things off. I know what you're doing, and I'm telling you, don't do it."

Snake leered as though he were being ordered about by a child. "Scurry on underground to your own kind. I've got assignments to handle tonight."

"You mean killing people."

Snake grunted. "Who're you to be high and mighty? Like you ain't done your share."

"Not like this. Not defenseless people, not for money."

"What's it to you? You always knew this was part of our work."

And I ignored it, Mike thought guiltily. *I only thought about what I needed from Doshida.* "It's hard to explain," he said, "but I can't let you do this."

Snake's eyebrows rose over his glasses.

"Call it off," Mike urged. "I'll go with you to talk to Doshida. There must be a way to resolve this. You guys have plenty of work that doesn't involve taking lives. There's no reason why you need to-"

"You talk too much, *coach.* " Snake spat at Mike's feet. "I've got a job to do. Now get out of the way."

Mike said, "You won't find her there. I've already warned her away."

Snake's face twitched, then flushed with disbelief and anger. "Why, you-" he pulled a thick, short serrated dagger from a holster on his thigh. "Insufferable, cocky little green fucker. You're not one of us anymore, not that you ever were, so I won't feel bad about killing you."

Mike's eyes traveled from the dagger blade to Snake's face. "I don't want to fight you. Put it away, okay? You may not have ever liked me, and I don't agree with what you're doing, but I don't want to hurt a squad teammate."

"We aren't *teammates.* You were there to get something for yourself, and so was I. And sorry to say, I don't feel the same way. In fact," he stepped sideways towards Mike in a fighting stance, bringing his dagger up, "I'm going to *enjoy* hurting you."

Mike put a hand on his nunchuku. "C'mon Snake," he said, "let's not-
"

Snake lunged.

Mike's nunchuks whistled through air, executing two moves together. The chain of one nunchuk trapped the wrist of Snake's knife hand, the other came down on the forearm, twice.

That should have been more than enough to make the man drop his dagger and render the attacking arm useless. To Mike's shock, Snake's arm bulged and he yanked it away, ripping the attached nunchuku from Michelangelo's grasp and sending it tumbling into the dark. The dagger came slashing back down towards the turtle's neck and he barely deflected it with his remaining nunchuku as he dropped low and swung behind Snake, thinking fast. He landed a crushing kidney strike, but suddenly found himself defending against a whirlwind of dagger swipes and thrusts. His weapon became a blur, clearing him enough space to leap out of range. His plastron was scored twice, and a warm trickle ran down his side, from ribcage to hip.

Snake read the open astonishment on his face. "Bet you're not used to losing, are you, coach?" He laughed. "All those times you thought I was taking it easy? Well, I was."

Michelangelo had begun the fight with the intention to stop Snake, but not seriously hurt or kill him. He was in a far different game now. The man had taken the strikes he'd delivered and barely flinched. It shouldn't be possible.

They clashed again, neither holding back, their movements blindingly fast and vicious. Even amongst his brothers Michelangelo was known for his speed and precision, and he easily outclassed Snake in fighting skill. But the man took blow after blow without falling, his blade dipping, weaving and slashing, too fast to believe.

They broke apart, breathing hard. Snake moved gingerly, and Mike had at least two more nasty cuts. One high on his shoulder bled freely, rivulets running together into a creek down the central groove of his plastron. He had to take out the dagger. He launched himself at Snake, and as his foe focused on the nunchuku flying straight at his face, Mike drove a shuriken into the meaty base of the man's knife hand.

The fingers spasmed and the weapon slipped from Snake's grasp. A well-aimed nunchuku blow sent the blade skittering across concrete. Michelangelo pressed his advantage, but Snake deflected the throat strike; it cracked against collarbone but didn't slow the man down as he barreled forward, slamming them both into the wall of the building behind them.

Close together, it became a contest of holds and locks. Mike brought his knee up into Snake's sternum, even as the man dashed the turtle's hand against brick, forcing the nunchuku from nerveless fingers. Mike's maneuver had bought him space and he snapped his bent elbow around, into the side of his opponent's head. The sunglasses flew off as the head jerked aside. Instead of crumpling unconscious, Snake brought his face back around and grinned.

Michelangelo gasped. There was something horribly wrong with the man's eyes. Huge, dilated pupils filled the irises, ringed with bright red blood that bulged beneath the membrane.

In the split second that he stared, Snake slammed his forearm against Mike's throat and locked it in place. Instantly, Mike dropped his chin and dug his powerful grip into the pressure points on the man's arm. It was no good. He went for a different chokehold break, again to no avail. He drove his knuckles into the man's armpit and still Snake was impervious. He should be screaming as Mike ground the nerves of his arm into pulp, but he only tightened his grip, pressing in with all his weight.

Michelangelo couldn't breathe. His windpipe was being steadily compressed, the air in his lungs being used up in his efforts to get

free. Bright white spots began to appear in his vision.

A dark shape dropped to earth and sailed towards Snake's back. Somehow the man sensed it and turned just in time, releasing Michelangelo, who slumped to the floor of the alleyway. Impossibly, Snake caught his attacker by the wrists. His forearms rippled as he squeezed down and twisted. The twin sai, which had sought to skewer him through the lungs, clattered to the ground as Snake planted a foot in his assailant's chest and launched him backwards.

Astounded as he was at the sudden reversal, Raphael checked his momentum and flew back at his opponent like a rock from a slingshot.

Snake came to meet him and the fight instantly reached an staggering level of ferocity. Both were fighting to kill with bare hands, going for damage over finesse as they exchanged flurry after flurry of brutal, punishing blows. When they broke apart and circled each other for an opening, Snake spat teeth and blood from his mouth and said, "Now it's getting good. And to think a whole army of ninjas couldn't take out one of you freaks."

Raphael did not answer. He felt warm wetness on his face and he was having a harder time bending the left side of his torso, but the bloodlust coursing through his body made him as insensible to pain as Snake seemed to be. He knew with certainty that he was in a death match. An adversary who could trap Michelangelo in a chokehold, who could disarm him in a full-speed charge, was not going to back down. And Raphael, sparing only a brief glance to make sure Michelangelo still breathed, before hurling himself back at his foe, was in a burning red place where his own survival was a secondary consideration.

Michelangelo rose to his hands and knees, his breath scalding the inside of his raw throat, his limbs rubbery, disconnected from his body. He raised his still ringing, throbbing head in time to see Snake catch Raphael by the edge of the shell and dash him to the ground. The turtle was up in an instant, whipping out a low sweep that forced

Snake back, and springing after him with an unrelenting barrage of strikes, finally landing a jaw-shattering back-fist just as Snake connected with the side of Raphael's ribcage, dropping him to his knees.

Mike saw what he was looking for and forced his body up, diving and rolling across the concrete. "Raph!" With all his might he hurled Snake's serrated dagger. It sank up to its hilt in the man's shoulder blade and Snake howled, turning and reaching for the wound. Mike flung a sai along the ground. It skittered between Snake's legs and Raphael caught it. Like a bird of prey, he rose into the air and came down, plunging the sai through the side of Snake's throat.

Snake fell. Raphael fell with him, until he felt the tip of his weapon, borne by his body weight, puncture the other side of his enemy's thick neck.

For a long minute, Raphael knelt, chest heaving, beads of sweat and blood rolling off his bowed head. "Mike," he said.

Michelangelo walked over and crouched next to him, rubbing his bruised neck. "I'm all right." He tried to smile, but it hurt. "What took you so long?"

Raphael flashed his brother an un-amused glare. He tore the phone from his belt and tossed it on the ground. "That thing doesn't track you when you go underground into the subway, you dumbass!" He coughed and stood up slowly. "By the time it picked up where the hell you were, you were halfway across town."

Mike picked up the small gadget. The screen was cracked, damaged in the fight. "I did wonder how you guys kept such good tabs on me. How did Don-"

"He put a homing thingamajig into your belt. Good thing too. I knew you'd end up in some shit storm." He looked down at Snake's body and scowled, shoving it with his foot. "You've got some major explaining to do. Like who the hell *was* this guy?"

Snake's eerie dead eyes stared up at Mike, who shook his head, sad and greatly disturbed. "I don't think I know." He turned away and retrieved his nunchuks, then said, "We should hide him. Better that Doshida doesn't find out right away."

Raphael nodded. Wincing from their injuries, they hefted Snake's body and carried it out of sight behind the dumpster at the end of the alley. It wouldn't stay hidden for long, but at least it would buy them time. Raphael yanked out his sai, wiped the blade on his armband and said, "This way."

"Isn't the easiest way underground in the other direction over by-" Mike did a double take as Raphael led him around the corner of the street. "Whoa, you took Casey's bike?"

"I *borrowed* it," Raphael corrected. "I know where he keeps the spare keys."

Despite this nightmare of a night, Mike could not help smiling, impressed. "Can I drive?"

Raphael snorted in disbelief. "After dragging us out here to nearly get killed? Hell no. You can ride behind me like a girl."

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Leonardo was on edge. He'd dozed off in an armchair earlier but had woken up in the middle of the night to discover that neither Michelangelo nor Raphael had returned. When he roused Donatello an hour later, he'd already decided it couldn't be mere coincidence that tonight was supposed to be the last night in Mike's three-month-long stint with the Rising Hand. Something was wrong. He could feel it.

"We'll find them, sensei," he said as he strapped on his scabbards.

Don had one of his modified cell phone devices in hand and the dazed look of a person who'd sprung awake too quickly. "I should be able to pick up Mike's location once we're aboveground."

Splinter nodded. Leo could see the concern in his flattened whiskers and his furrowed brow, but the sensei spoke calmly. "Surely Raphael is with him."

There was a sound from the entryway and the three of them rushed over to see Michelangelo come in. Leo let out a breath of relief, then sucked it back in at the sight of the blood dried on his brother's plastron. "What happened?" he demanded. "Where's-"

"I'm right here," Raphael said, stepping in behind Mike.

"Jesus," Don said at the sight of Raph's face, the right side scraped raw and swelling up purple. "What hit you?"

Raphael jerked a thumb at Michelangelo. "Ask him." He bent over a little, hand on his left side. "We got any Vicodin stashed away?"

"Tend to them. Explanations can wait." Splinter's voice was tight, clipped.

After his gashes had been stitched up and his torn knuckles bandaged, Michelangelo sat down heavily, pressing an ice pack to his neck and wiping the blood off himself with a wet towel. He looked up into the circle of expectant faces. "I don't know where to start."

"How about who you were fighting," Leonardo suggested.

"One of Doshida's men. A guy named Snake. He was on the squad that Doshida asked me to train. Except, I never really had a handle on him, he was always aloof and kinda odd."

" *Odd?"* Raphael grimaced as he took the antiseptic pad that Don handed him and pressed it to his face. "That's one way to put it. He was frickin' unreal."

"One man," Donatello said. One man had taken on two of them together.

Mike said, "He was crazy fast and strong. Unnatural, even... like he didn't feel pain. And his eyes were bloody, big - they looked all messed up."

Leo and Don exchanged glances with Splinter. "How did it happen?" Leo asked.

"Just before I was about to leave for good tonight I found out that Snake had been sent on an assassination assignment. I went to stop him and he wasn't too happy that I warned away his target before he got there."

Leonardo looked over at Raphael, who said, "I got there during the fight."

"You knew, Michelangelo," Splinter reminded him, "that the Rising Hand engaged in criminal activities. Why did you choose this particular instance to intervene, so suddenly, and on your own?"

Michelangelo lowered his eyes. "I had to." He pulled a folded photograph from his belt and handed it to Leonardo. "I saw her name, on the photos of Snake's targets."

Leo opened the photograph. "This is-" He stared, and sat down slowly without finishing the sentence.

"Who?" Don took the photo from him.

"Holly Chambers," Mike said. "Standing next to her father, Dr. Evan Chambers."

Raphael frowned over Don's shoulder. "The man who-"

"Yeah, that's him," Don said.

Mike said, "His daughter is on Saito Doshida's hit list."

Stunned silence- so absolute they could hear the faint sloshing of runoff water outside.

Softly, Splinter asked, "Could it possibly be because of his association with us?"

"Maybe. I don't know, sensei," Mike said. "We haven't had any contact with him for a year, and he wouldn't remember anything about us."

Leonardo stood up and paced over to the wall, bracing one arm against it, head bowed. "You did the right thing, Mike," he said, but his eyes were fixed on a crack in the plaster.

"Where is Ms. Chambers now?" Splinter asked.

"I don't know. I broke into her apartment and left her a note, telling her to leave for her own safety. I saw her get into a cab."

"And this man- Snake?"

"Dead," Raphael supplied. "Won't be long before he's found though."

"Doshida will know it was me," Mike said. "Tami- another Rising Hand ninja- she saw me looking at the assignment file."

"What will Doshida do?" Donatello wondered.

"He won't leave a job uncompleted," Mike said. "He'll send someone else to find her. As for us...I don't know what he'll do, but he won't be happy about me jeopardizing Agete's business, or about Snake's death." Michelangelo dropped his head into his hands. When he raised it again, his face was a picture of abject misery. "I'm sorry. This is a mess. You were right, from the beginning. Getting involved with the Rising Hand was bound to end badly." He looked at Raphael apologetically. "You know, up until tonight, I thought I was going to pull it off. I really thought it would turn out okay."

Raphael shook his head. "Numbnut that you are, this ain't your fault, Mike."

"There is truth to your brother's words, Michelangelo," Splinter said. "You fulfilled your agreement honorably. It is Saito Doshida who has chosen to profit from the taking of lives."

"And I worked for him," Mike added, despondent. "I trained his team. And now he'll use them against us. He even has me on video."

Leonardo turned back, solemn. "What's done is done, Mike. All you wanted was to help- to help Raph, to help the Rising Hand ninjas who trusted you, to help Holly Chambers. You shouldn't be sorry for any of that."

For once, Michelangelo was silent, expressing deep, weary gratitude only with his eyes.

Leonardo said, "We'll do whatever we have to, to get Doshida to lift the death sentence on Holly Chambers. In the meantime, we need to find out where she is and make sure she's protected." As the words

left his mouth, he felt their undeniable weight press down on him, on all of them. He looked at Splinter. For a desperate moment, he wanted his sensei to step in, to overrule him. Of course he would not. "Mike," Leo continued, "you'll need to tell us everything you know about Agete - the people, the headquarters, anything that might help us know what we're up against."

Splinter did speak up now, only to say, "Later. First, the two of you must sleep."

Michelangelo nodded. He was drooping with exhaustion, cold, blood loss and stress. Even Raphael, who frowned at the thought of being left out of any ensuing conversation, didn't put up a fight when the elderly rat put a firm hand under his son's elbow and steered him towards his room.

As he passed Leonardo, Raphael paused. "You want to know what we're up against," he said. "It took both me and Mike to take down that one bastard. I don't know where the hell Doshida got him, but I wouldn't expect him to be the only one."

Leonardo put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Get some rest."

Donatello took Leonardo aside as their brothers left the room. Don had a look on his face that Leo had seen before: his checkmate face. An expression that would sometimes appear halfway through a game of chess between them, or when Don was in the middle of a frustrating technical problem. It meant he'd already played through the whole thing in his mind and determined that he couldn't win.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked.

Lay our lives on the line to go to war with the Rising Hand over the life of a stranger? Leo met Don's knowing gaze. "We owe that family a great debt," he said.

"I know that better than anyone. But to protect one woman indefinitely against an entire ninja organization? What leverage do

we have against the Rising Hand? If there's one thing we know about Doshida, it's that he's one determined son of a bitch. And if Raph's suspicions are correct, and he has more...super soldiers..."

"I don't know how we're going to do it, Don. Only that we're obligated to try. Could you argue otherwise?"

Don let out a troubled sigh. "No."

"Donatello is correct, however," Splinter said, coming back into the room. "The Rising Hand is considerably more powerful than it was last year. And Saito Doshida is no Oruku Saki, to be drawn into a challenge of honor and met in battle. You must find a different way." The sensei laid the full authority of his gaze on them. "Be careful."

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

"What have you found out?" Leonardo asked.

"It's amazing how much information people post about themselves online." Donatello swiveled around in his chair and flipped back a page of a small, coil-bound notebook. "Holly Chambers is twenty-four years old. She's a third-year medical school student at NYU. She's single, lives by the East River, and follows American Idol religiously. ″ Noticing Leonardo's impatient expression, he said, "As for why someone would want her dead, I haven't a clue yet. All her online associations seem innocuous enough. Running marathons, scrapbooking..."

"How about where she might have gone?"

"Her father's place seems like an obvious possibility. Her mom lives in North Carolina. No mention of any brothers or sisters. Then there's these two friends..." He pulled up an image on the computer screen. "She's in loads of pictures with them. She might have gone to one of them."

"What on earth are they doing?" Leonardo leaned in for a closer look.

"Looks like Jell-o shots at a college toga party." Donatello scrolled down the page of photos and sighed. "What I wouldn't give to go to college."

Leonardo glanced at the clock. Four o'clock in the afternoon. "We should get them up."

"I'm up." Michelangelo stepped through the doorway, slightly wobbly but alert. "I just remembered that I need to collect the container of

meds that Doshida delivered last night." There was a moment of awkward silence. The irony was not lost on them.

"Grab a bite to eat," Leo said. "As soon as the sun goes down, we'll go pick up and store that container. Then we'll go back to Ms. Chambers apartment and see what else we can learn."

"I'll wake Raph," Don said. "The two of us will go to Dr. Chambers's place and see if his daughter is there."

It was almost midnight by the time Michelangelo pointed to the balcony where he'd crouched less than twenty-four hours earlier. "That's the one." It looked unchanged from the previous night, the curtains still drawn, the one lamp by the front door still glowing. The police tape cordoning off the dumpster area further down the alley, however, told a different story. Snake's body had been discovered. If Doshida did not already know, he would soon.

Leonardo's intense gaze swept across the street. "Lead the way," he said. "Stay sharp."

They went in the same way Mike had the previous night, rappelling over to the roof, dropping to the balcony and letting themselves in the window. As they straightened up in the kitchen, Mike whispered, "What are we looking for?"

"Anything that might help." Leonardo started opening drawers.

Michelangelo went into the bedroom and returned several few minutes later. "Jackpot," he said. He laid a square cloth-covered book on the kitchen counter. "She's got half a dozen of these." He flipped through the lovingly designed pages festooned with textured stickers and curly fonts. "Here she is with her dad. And here are those two friends." *Graduation!* one of the captions read. *Me and June at Melissa's new place in New Jersey* read another, several pages later. "This feels weird," Mike said, "snooping around in her life like this."

"Necessary if we're going to find her and keep her alive." Leonardo pulled a slim black notebook from the kitchen drawer. "Address book," he said. "I wonder if-"

He stopped in mid-sentence. They both sensed it at the same time. The near-silent footfall of someone on the balcony.

Leonardo dropped below the height of the kitchen counter and Mike flattened himself behind the short section of wall that boxed in the refrigerator. They heard the window slide open. A dark silhouette appeared in the frame and let itself into the apartment. Leonardo began to move, his hand sliding back for the hilt of his katana.

"Ren? Leo, wait!"

Leonardo checked himself in mid-step. Ren leapt backwards in alarm at the sight of the turtle's silhouette and the glinting, poised katana. He crashed into the dish rack on the counter, sending plates clattering. Tami's head and shoulders appeared in the window, then jerked back. "Shit!" she shouted, pulling a throwing knife with each hand.

"Stop, stop!" Michelangelo stepped in front of Leonardo, spreading his arms out.

The two sides stood frozen for a heartbeat. "It's okay," Mike said to Tami and Ren. "This is my brother." He prodded Leonardo with his elbow. "Stow the katana," he whispered.

Leonardo considered for a moment, eyes narrowed. Then he straightened and sheathed his weapons. Mike read the question in his sidelong glance.

"They're Rising Hand. But I know them. This is Ren, and that's Tami."

Leonardo accepted his introduction silently.

"Come inside," Mike said to Tami.

Tami hesitated. She tucked away her knives and climbed in, eyeing Leonardo distrustfully. She faced Michelangelo, her mouth set in a hard, resentful line. "You killed Snake."

"He nearly killed *me* ," Mike said. "And he was going to murder an unsuspecting woman."

"That was his *assignment* ." Tami's petite features sharpened into a glare and she took a step forward, momentarily forgetting Leo's presence. "I didn't love Snake either, but he was one of us. Why did you have to interfere?"

"You saw those photos just like I did," Mike said. "I had to stop him, but I didn't want him dead. I tried to talk him out of it-"

Leonardo's tone shut down the exchange. "Why are you here?" he asked the two humans. "To make a second assassination attempt?"

Ren shook his head vigorously. He still seemed to be recovering from shock, his eyes flicking wildly between Mike, Leo and Tami. "Doshida-san thought that you might come back here, so we were sent to leave you a message."

"And that is?"

Tami said, "He wants to meet with you. All of you."

Through the dark glass of the front double doors, they could see that the lobby of Agete's building was lit. Leonardo regarded the building uneasily. He decided he preferred certain battle over a 'meeting' with Saito Doshida. Swinging blades were more predictable.

"Did you find anything else at the doctor's place?" he asked Donatello. Don and Raph had found Evan Chambers's home dark and unoccupied. Fridge empty, bed made, car gone. It appeared as though the doctor was out of town. No sign of Holly Chambers.

"One other thing," Don said. "The lock on the door was broken. It didn't look as though anything had been taken. Someone was there before us."

"They're searching for her too," Raphael said. "Good thing we didn't find her- she probably wouldn't've been breathing."

In the ambient glow of the streetlights, the bruised right side of Raphael's face looked ghastly. He and Michelangelo were both hurting from last night, and if this discussion with the Rising Hand turned violent, Leonardo knew they'd be fighting at considerably less than full strength. "We'll go," he said. "But stay by the entrance. If this goes south, we'll need to get out into the open, fast." He looked pointedly at Raphael. "He's on home turf. We're not going to fight here, not if we don't have to."

They approached. As they reached the entrance, Ren opened the doors and stood aside, staring at the four turtles with open-mouthed amazement and trepidation. Mike winked at him reassuringly as they stepped into the lobby.

Leonardo took several strides in and stopped, his brothers coming up beside him. They were in a rectangular space with sleek black sofas and armchairs, low glass and metal tables and boldly patterned hardwood floors. The high ceiling rose up past the unlit second floor, which overlooked the lobby. At the far end of the room was the large stairwell that the four of them had dropped onto from the skylight, six months ago.

Saito Doshida was sitting in one of the armchairs, flanked by two large, tough-looking men in dark glasses and black shirts, one of them sporting a short goatee, the other a bulbous and crooked nose. Bodyguards, Leo presumed. Doshida rose and stepped forward. Tami followed a couple paces behind, Ren stayed near the door. There was no one else.

Doshida said, "Let's cut to the chase. I'm afraid there's been a... misunderstanding. You see, I was under the impression," he looked

at Mike, "that we had a working relationship. Or at least, a mutual respect."

Leonardo let a second pass before he replied. "Call off the hit on Holly Chambers."

Doshida frowned. "Why?"

"You spoke of mutual respect. That's not possible if your clan, your business, is based on murder for profit."

"We ninja have always been assassins."

"We've also been protectors."

Doshida stepped back and scrutinized the four turtles. "I've no desire for us to be enemies. After all," he turned a slight smile on Raphael and then Michelangelo, "we've had a long, productive history together. I'm willing to overlook this...incident, so long as you stop interfering with Agete's operations."

" *You're* willing to overlook-" Raphael's incredulous voice rose over Doshida's. "Your crony dug his own grave, Saito." He pointed to the swollen right side of his face. "This is what I get outta our *long, productive history* , you prick."

"You have other work." Leonardo said. "Call off the assassinations."

"Impossible. We won't back out of commitments that we've made to clients."

"Then we are honor-bound to stop you."

In the silence that followed, Leonardo felt the current of tension come to a standstill, the way a drop of water hangs full and motionless before it falls. His senses sharpened, his awareness ballooned outward.

There are others in this room .

Saito said, "I regret that it's come to-"

He stopped suddenly, staring in mute shock through the front doors.

The sound of shattering glass filled the room. Instantly, an alarm went off, a shrill, pulsing whine. From either side of the lobby, broken windows let in a gush of cool night air, followed by a silent stream of black-clad figures.

Tami's lips formed the words almost inaudibly. "The Foot."

"Well," Raphael said. "This just got *real* interesting."

The leading Foot soldiers faltered for a second. They looked from Doshida and his men to the turtles, confused to find them together. Saito's face had gone white, but his eyes were hard as granite. He raised his arm in a signal.

"Aw, shit," Don said.

All hell breaking loose...now.

"Move!" Leonardo yelled. His voice was drowned out by another blast of the alarm and the erupting pandemonium, but his brothers fell into a defensive formation at once, following tightly as Leo dropped low and sprinted for the far end of the lobby. The men who had been concealed on the second floor sprang up, sighting their weapons over the waist-high wall into the lobby below. Darts began to rain down. Foot ninja began collapsing, like sacks of flour.

Leonardo dove the last few feet to get under the second floor overhang, out of sniper range. His shoulder hit the floor and he rolled to his feet, his brothers with him.

They were face to face with a cluster of Foot soldiers. Both sides froze. The few feet of air between them seemed to go taut, like the space between two magnets.

Then the Foot attacked.

Leonardo's katana clashed with an incoming blade; he drove down and forward, one sword controlling the opposing weapon, the other, held in a reserve grip, cutting across the soldier's ribs as Leo lunged straight past, the lethal arc of his katana clearing space for him to pivot, to give Michelangelo fighting room, to find Raphael's flank.

"Why the hell are you attacking us?" Mike shouted as his nunchuks disabled the two soldiers nearest him. "It's Doshida you're after, remember?"

Through the front entrance, the imposing figure of Kan Masataro appeared, accompanied by a line of his troops. The *jonin* surveyed the chaos and barked a command. Soldiers raced up the stairwell and the shower of darts stopped as fighting broke out on the second floor. Kan's eyes locked on Saito Doshida. For a moment, they stared each other down from across the room, mutual hatred seeming to fry the space between them. Then, his face twisted in a grimace, the leader of the Rising Hand turned and sped down the hall. A score of Foot ninja set off in pursuit.

"Doshida's getting away," Raphael said through gritted teeth as he blocked a short sword attack and retaliated with a sai hilt strike between the soldier's eyes.

"He's got the right idea." More Foot were coming in, even as Doshida's men pushed back against the onslaught, spilling the fight off the stairwell. From the corner of his eye, Leonardo caught a glimpse of Kan wading into the fray, his movements exceedingly simple and deliberate, almost mechanical, though too graceful to be called so, each cut of his katana precise and fatal.

Gunshots began ringing out. Doshida's two bodyguards had drawn handguns and closed in behind their retreating leader, firing at the Foot as they backed down the hallway. Darting to and fro behind them, Tami was whipping throwing knives in quick succession. "Ren!" she shouted.

Ren was fighting to join her. His hanbo spinning and striking, he held two Foot soldiers at bay, but they persisted, sensing his fear and inexperience, and a minute later, a chain whip snagged Ren's weapon and plucked it from his grasp. With a shout, and a cyclone of fierce spin kicks, Mike forced back the three Foot ninja around him, creating enough of an opening to burst between two of them and head for Ren. The teen cast Mike a desperate look and took two steps in his direction before a staff came down on his knee, buckling the leg. He fell and disappeared beneath an onslaught of weapons.

"No!" Michelangelo's speed-blurred nunchuks tore through the crowd of Foot. Two men pitched backwards as Tami, from across the room, emptied her belt of throwing knives with an enraged cry. Standing ground over the motionless form on the floor, knowing right away that he was too late, Mike battered back the surrounding soldiers with terrible ferocity, but seeing him separated from the other turtles, it only took the Foot a minute to start pressing back in.

Donatello was closest, and already moving, the precise, powerful strikes of his bo smashing through the circle of soldiers before they could close in. Wordlessly, he and Michelangelo fought back to back.

Kan was staring at them in astonishment and anger.

Leonardo trapped a kama blade between his swords and twisted it free. As its twin curved towards his head, he ducked low and sliced upward, was rewarded with a garbled cry and the thud of a man hitting the floor. Beside him, one of Raphael's sai caught a fighter's wrist and the other dropped him with a smash to the collarbone. Leo grabbed the edge of his brother's shell. "Cover them and get us out of here!"

Raphael was gone before the words finishing leaving Leo's mouth. He plowed a vicious path over to Mike and Don and sprang past them. As he landed in a crouch, he dropped his sai and tore into his belt, flinging two handfuls of shuriken, left and right. The Foot staggered back from the shower of sharp metal fragments and Leo heard his brother yell, "Go, dammit! Go!"

Donatello ran past Raphael, through the momentarily open corridor. There was a Foot soldier in his way and he took him down as he passed, his bo spinning smoothly from one hand into the other and drawing a blinding upwards arc, catching the man squarely under the chin. Don hurtled through the broken window and into the night.

Raphael grabbed his sai with one hand and Mike with the other, pulling him away from Ren's body. The two of them followed close on Donatello's heels. Leonardo put on a burst of speed, sweeping both katana wide to keep the regrouping Foot at bay. As he raced after his brothers, he stowed his swords and ripped into his own belt pouch. He turned and flung all three smoke pellets at once. Clouds of dense smoke bloomed behind him as he went over the bottom edge of the broken window like a hurdler. He reached back and tore open the hidden compartment at the end of his scabbard, emptying its stash of caltrops on the ground as he ran across the damp grass of the small lawn, through the pebbly concrete parking lot, and across the street. As he reached the cover of the buildings on the other side, the sound of police sirens rose like an incoming tide, louder and louder, until it was finally shut out by the familiar, blessed clang of the manhole cover falling into place above him.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Delayed verdict: it could be worse.

Fights were often like that. So intense in the moment that they filled up all capacity for perceiving reality. It wasn't until hours afterwards that the body would get back in touch with the brain and report on how it had fared.

Leonardo was hitting that point now. He thought of one of Don's computers, running a post-crash diagnostic scan on itself. He'd taken a heavy blow to his left thigh; it hurt to put too much weight on the leg. His heel had been sliced by a shard of glass and was tightly bandaged. A sizeable nick on the shell. Tired and sore as hell. Like he said, it could be worse.

Master Splinter had not stopped moving since they'd come in. He had been filling basins with warm water, washing and dressing wounds, fetching things from their stash of medical supplies, and re-checking each of them in turn.

"Drink, Michelangelo," he ordered, holding out a cup of medicinal broth. "Slowly."

It wasn't fair to him, Leonardo thought. Age should be accompanied by less worry, not more. Their sensei shouldn't have to stay up all night wondering whether his sons would come home, and then bustle about in the wee hours of the dawn tending to their battle injuries. But fairness hadn't exactly ever been a governing force in their lives.

Leo's eyes made a slow, assessing circle around their living room. Donatello had a long but shallow gash on his upper arm that had been wrapped up, a gouge down his plastron that would heal lighter

and add to the other faded scars, and a swollen jaw that he was holding an ice pack to. He was otherwise uninjured.

Raphael and Michelangelo weren't faring as well. Thankfully nothing life-threatening or debilitating, but they had spent the last two nights constantly on the move and fighting full-tilt, and it showed. Since Splinter had bandaged the chain whip laceration on Raphael's leg, he'd been sitting very still on the edge of the coffee table, no doubt because it hurt to move. There wasn't much to be done for his cracked ribs other than another dose of painkillers.

Mike's knife wounds from the previous night had reopened; the stitches had to be torn out and new ones put in. The bruises on his neck had darkened to yellowish-purple and he'd added sizeable new ones to his forearms. He had his knees drawn up on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around him, as he stared miserably and exhaustedly into his mug. "Is it just me," he asked, "or have the Foot gotten better?"

Donatello shook his head. "It's not just you. Kan must be doing something right. The Foot seem stronger than they've been in years."

Mike dropped his forehead onto his knees, his voice becoming muffled in the space against his body. "Ren... that poor kid." He took a heavy breath that made his shell shudder under the blanket, and said to himself, "He'd only just started working with the hanbo, he wasn't much good at it yet. If I hadn't been so far away..." His brothers said nothing, giving his awkward sadness the space it needed, and after a couple minutes, he lifted his head, his face gloomy but composed. "Do you think the Foot will catch Doshida?"

"I doubt it," Leonardo said. "But they won't give up either."

"Our typical luck," Raph said. "We had to be there on the night of the Foot blitzkrieg."

"Might be luckier than you think," Donatello said. "Those snipers, those bodyguards... Doshida had them on hand to use against *us* , if we didn't back down." He shook his head. "We would've been fighting them instead of the Foot."

"Instead, now we're up against both," Mike said.

"The Foot and the Rising Hand are two sides of the same coin. One traditional, one modern, but both criminal, both ruthless." Master Splinter finally sat down, drying the fur on his forearms and hands with a towel. "They will, however, be weakened from their encounter tonight. We may have some time, before they are able to regroup."

"So where does that leave us?" Mike asked.

"Where we started before the night went to hell," Leonardo said. "We still have to protect Holly Chambers from being murdered."

He could feel the skepticism hanging in the air before Donatello spoke. "Are we even in a position to do that, Leo? Walking around with a bulls-eye on our shells from both clans?"

"Kill Doshida," Raphael said. "He was ready to kill us rather than call off the hit. The only way to stop him is to take him out."

"Is it?" Donatello asked. "Someone wants Ms. Chambers dead and hired Doshida to make it happen. Eliminating the assassin won't eliminate the client. They could just find someone else to do the job. We can't protect this woman for the rest of her life. We don't even know why she's a target."

Leonardo said nothing. Donatello was right, and he knew it.

Splinter said to him, "Ms. Chambers may indeed be in a predicament that is beyond our ability to defend against." He sighed. "I do not wish to risk our exposure, but we cannot judge this situation until we better understand it."

"Look, I get that we don't want to see this lady offed," Raphael said, "but we just busted out a building full of ninjas trying to kill us, so wouldn't you say we kinda got our own problems?" He stood up, stifling a wince. "We take our eyes off Doshida and he'll disappear like a snake. He'll let us tangle with the Foot until he figures out a way to take us both out, sneaky-like." He locked eyes with Leo. "We put Agete out of business, and we'll be saving more than one person."

Leonardo looked over at Splinter.

Their sensei folded his hands together pensively. "This war between the Foot and Rising Hand endangers us. We have too much troubled history with both clans. Each will consider us a continued threat, as well as a weapon against the rival clan. Raphael is right; we must remain vigilant against their schemes."

"But," Michelangelo interjected, "Holly Chambers-"

"I was not finished, Michelangelo," Splinter continued. "We cannot forsake the daughter of the man who aided us when we were most in need. If it is within our ability to help her, then we must."

Leonardo nodded slowly, turning things over in his mind. "Don," he said, "You and Mike know the most about Holly Chambers right now. The two of you run with the leads you have, try to find her. And figure out why she's being hunted."

Donatello and Michelangelo exchanged an acknowledging glance. Donatello said, "I have an idea. But we'll need April's help."

"And you guys?" Mike asked.

"Raph and I will scout. We'll try to determine what the Foot and the Rising Hand are up to, what their next move is. We'll find Doshida if we can. Kill him if we have to."

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

April O' Neil pulled in along the curb across from the row of pastel-colored houses. She turned off the engine and swiveled to face the back seat. "This is it," she announced.

Donatello raised his head and risked a peek through the tinted roller shades that April had drawn down over the back windows. "Nice looking neighborhood. So...spacious."

After everything he'd been through in the last thirty-six hours, Michelangelo was barely himself; glum and melancholy, he'd said so little during the long drive that it made April fidgety and nervous. She was so used to Mike's near-constant chatter that the absence of it was like being in a forest with no birds. He groaned now, resting his forehead on the back of the driver's seat as he shifted from his uncomfortable position on the floor of her car. "Ughh... Do people really spend this much time in a car every day?" He added quickly, "I didn't mean to complain, April. I mean, it would have taken us forever to get here otherwise."

"Don't mention it." Begging off early from work and fighting traffic all the way down the NJ-3 E to Montclair, New Jersey was hardly her ideal way to spend an afternoon either. But she hadn't hesitated; the Turtles did not ask for favors unless they had to, and she could tell, from Michelangelo's subdued voice on the phone earlier, and the various fresh wounds her friends were sporting, that this was one of those situations.

Even so, and even though she was living proof that the turtles would defend even the lives of strangers, she'd been stunned by the explanation that Leonardo had given her earlier that afternoon. "So, you've never met her?" she had asked, studying the creased photograph.

"I don't need to." Seeing April's flabbergasted look, he had said, "Do you believe in karma, April? Last year, a man who had no reason to help us risked everything to do so, and I repaid him by drugging him and leaving him with amnesia." Leo's eyes had followed Mike and Don as they ascended to the alley where April had parked, but his gaze had been distant. "Maybe all this has happened for a reason. A life for a life - we're meant to repay that debt."

The tidy homes she looked upon now seemed an unlikely place to be mulling the hand of fate. Michelangelo asked, "So, how do we know this is the right place?"

"We don't," Don replied. "But there's only one New Jersey address listed for a Melissa Tzaras in the NYU alumni database. Now we need to find out if Holly Chambers is here."

"That should be easy," April said, unclipping her seatbelt. "I'll go ring the doorbell."

"Wait," Donatello said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "She knows her life is in danger. If she is here, she's not likely to come to the door and talk to strangers."

"It's worth a try though," Mike said. "Do you have a pen and a piece of paper?"

"What for?" April rummaged in her glove compartment and handed Michelangelo a Post-It note pad and a ballpoint pen.

He wrote a few words, pulled off the sheet, and folded it in half. "If she is there, you can give her this," he said.

April slipped the note into her pocket. She opened her car door and stepped out into the foggy early evening blend of orange streetlight and grayish sky. Crossing the street and climbing the three steps to the front door of the address Donatello had given her, she felt unexpectedly nervous. She glanced back at her car; no sign of anyone in it. She rang the doorbell.

A dog started barking from inside. She heard a female voice admonishing the dog, and then after several more seconds, footsteps, and the sound of the deadbolt being drawn back.

The door opened on a young, slightly heavy-set woman with an olive complexion and dark, curly hair. Not the woman in the photograph. "Hello," April said. "Are you Melissa Tzaras?"

"Yes," the woman said, pushing her cocker spaniel back with her foot.

"I'm looking for a friend of yours, Holly Chambers. Is she here by any chance?"

Melissa's face stiffened immediately, and she focused on April's face with obvious suspicion. "Here? No, why would she be here? She lives in Manhattan."

She's lying, April thought, *and she's not good at it.* "Holly might be in trouble, and I'm trying to help. Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?"

"No. No, I don't know. Sorry I can't help you." Melissa Tzaras stepped back hastily and started to shut the door.

"Wait," April said, quickly holding out Mike's folded note. "If you do see her, for any reason, can you please give this to her?"

The young woman hesitated. April pulled a pen from her coat pocket and wrote on the back of the note. "Here's my name and cell phone number. Tell her she can call me." She held it out again. "It's really important. Please."

"I said I don't know where she is," Melissa insisted.

"I understand. But just in case you happen to see her."

Melissa wavered. She snatched the slip of paper and closed the door firmly.

April walked back across the street and got into her car. She could see Melissa peering out from her window. "Stay down until I turn the corner," she said, starting the engine and pulling away.

"Well?" Don lifted his head as they left the street behind.

"She's there. If she's not, Melissa Tzaras knows where she is."

The motel room stank of stale cigarette smoke and the checkered bedspread looked as though it dated back to when the building had been constructed. April quickly drew the heavy gray drapes, shutting out the view of the freeway and unsettling thick layers of dust. She tried turning on the small television. It didn't work.

None of these things seemed to diminish Donatello and Michelangelo's discomfited gratitude. "April, you really don't have to do this," Don said, again. "It won't take that long for you to drive home. Mike and I can fend for ourselves."

"We're out in the 'burbs," she said. "Were you thinking I'd just drop you on a street corner and you'd find a place to hide and sleep outside?"

She could tell from their faces that was exactly what they were thinking. "We'd be fine," Mike said. "It'd be like camping."

April shook her head. Even though she knew her friends were accustomed to surviving under all manner of adverse circumstances, she just couldn't do it. She pulled the ratty bedspread aside and sat down on the yellowish sheets. "Well, pretend you're on vacation then," she said, not intending to sound sarcastic.

Donatello gave in and flopped down on the other bed, which sagged underneath him. Michelangelo pulled the Yellow Pages from the bedside table and paged to the pizza delivery section. "As long as we're living it up, right?" he said with a smile, picking up the ancient-looking corded phone.

"This place..." Donatello mused aloud, turning over and staring at the water stains on the ceiling. "No rooftops, no tunnels, no alleys... If Holly Chambers is out here, how are we supposed to keep her safe? We've got to get her back to the city."

"If she's even out here," Mike added, cradling the phone between his shoulder and head as he punched numbers on the phone pad. April noticed him adjust the receiver to avoid pressing it on the nasty jagged gash that was scabbing over under small stitches. The weak bedside table lamp illuminated one side of his shell; its rippled patterning stood out against the bare beige wall behind him. April found herself thinking of the unsmiling middle-aged receptionist in the motel lobby, who'd handed her the room key without looking up from Soap Opera Digest, and imagining her reaction if she knew that room 26 was occupied by mutant ninjas.

"We'll go back in the morning, before it's light," Don suggested. "Once Melissa leaves for work, we can get into her place."

Michelangelo rolled his eyes impatiently, gesturing to the phone and mouthing "On hold."

April's cell phone rang. She jumped for her purse and dug it out. "Hello?"

"Is this April O'Neil?" A woman's voice asked tentatively.

"Yes."

There was a long pause. "This is Holly Chambers."

"Holly," April said. Donatello sat up quickly and motioned urgently for Mike to hang up on the pizzeria. As calmly as she could, April said, "I'm glad you called."

"Who are you? Why have you been looking for me?"

"I know that you're in danger, and...I want to help."

"How? How do you know that?" The voice sounded scared and skeptical.

"It's complicated. It would be better if we could talk in person. Can I meet you?"

Another pause. "Okay. Tomorrow, then. Someplace public."

April turned over the sticky, laminated one-page menu and handed it back to the waitress. "Just coffee, please." The diner was sparsely populated at mid-morning. Slow-moving ceiling fans circulated greasy breakfast smells reminiscent of similar chain eateries everywhere. Her cell phone had two new voice messages: one from her boss, one from Casey, no doubt both replying to the rather short and unsatisfying messages she had left them last night. She silenced the phone and tucked it into her purse. She could deal with the fallout later. It wasn't as though this was the first time she'd disappeared unexpectedly on unusual business. At least Casey would understand.

She wondered where Don and Mike were now. Probably skulking around the back of the building, or up on the roof. They had both been edgy after leaving her car, parked two blocks away, behind an empty building that used to a be a furniture store. Daytime in the suburbs was nothing like nighttime in the city; the ease and stealth with which they navigated Manhattan did not apply here. Even so, when she'd looked behind herself after walking no more than ten paces, there'd been no sign of them.

They could not come in here though. They could not sit down in a diner, order a meal and meet the beneficiary of their efforts. She felt a familiar pang of injustice, but also allowed herself a small moment of pride. There were things that they needed her for after all. She knew that, of course, but it was nice to be reminded.

The door to the diner swung open, and the woman April had seen in the photograph stood in the entryway, craning her neck to look

around the inside of the restaurant nervously. April caught her eye and Holly Chambers walked over to the table with a small, hesitant smile.

She's so *young,* April thought, as Holly slid into the seat opposite her and shrugged off her white coat. She studied the pretty face, wondering what this young woman could possibly have done to make someone want to assassinate her, then realized that Holly was looking back at her with equally dubious curiosity, no doubt wondering what sort of shady character she was. "Hi," she said, with what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "I'm April."

"Holly." She shook her head at the waitress who asked if she wanted anything. Then she pulled two pieces of paper from her coat pocket and slide them across the table. "Did you write these?"

One note was on plain, ruled paper, it's top edge perforated where it had been torn from a small spiral notepad. April recognized Michelangelo's large, slanted handwriting.

Your life is in danger. Leave right now and go somewhere safe.

A friend,

M

The second note was the yellow Post-It she had left with Melissa Tzaras yesterday afternoon. The same hand had written simply,

Trust her.

M

April set the two pieces of paper back down. "No, I didn't write them."

"But you can tell me who did."

April studied the inside of her coffee mug, carefully formulating her words before returning the woman's expectant gaze. "This may not

make much sense to you, but I'll tell you what I can. Last year, your father did a good deed and helped some strangers who needed medical care. The people he helped... they usually keep their existence secret. But they haven't forgotten what he did for them. So when they learned you were in danger, they protected you."

Holly Chambers had an understandably bewildered look on her face. "My dad?" She swallowed hard. "Is he mixed up in anything...bad?"

"No, nothing like that. He just happened to be a doctor... and a kind person."

Holly had gone pale. "An awful thing happened to my dad last year. He woke up and couldn't remember anything from the past three days. He says it's a sure symptom of early onset degenerative brain disease. But so far all the tests he's taken have turned out negative." She hugged herself, shrinking away from April slightly. "These people you mentioned... did they do that to him?"

April hesitated, then nodded.

Holly looked as if she wanted to grab her coat and flee, but was fixed in place by the need to know more. "This is like something from a movie, right? Shadowy secret agents that control things and can wipe out your memory?"

A chuckle started to escape April's lips, but considering the woman's genuine distress, she hid it behind a sip of coffee. "No, it's not anything so... sinister. Your dad doesn't have degenerative brain disease. They gave him an amnesiac, only to protect themselves. And him. They help people when they can, but they have enemies too." She stopped. She'd said enough. Anything else was only going to make the poor girl more confused and cause her to press further. "I know it's not much. But it's all I can say."

Holly stared at her, incredulous. "You're right, it's not. You're not going to tell me anything else?"

"It's not for me to tell."

"Who *are* you?"

"Just a normal person, who happens to know them." April felt a sudden twinge of something connecting her secretly but profoundly to the woman across the table. She nearly added, *I was just like you. Someone in trouble, in the wrong place at the wrong time. And they were there.* Except that she had seen them up close, and they had had no way to erase her memory, and there had been no turning back.

It was clear from the look on Holly's face that she wasn't sure what, if anything, to believe. "So they sent you, to find me? Why?"

April leaned forward, lowering her voice. "To ask why someone would want to kill you."

Holly's eyes darted away, then quickly back to April, before dropping to her hands. Fear made her seem even younger and more vulnerable. "If you know so much, don't you already know that too?"

"No. Can you tell me?"

Another frightened twitch of the eyes. "I've barely slept since that note showed up in my apartment," she admitted in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "I don't know who I can trust."

With a pang of sympathy, April reached across the table and put her hands on one of Holly's. "The person who left you the note-"

" *M?* "

" *M* kept you safe that one night. These people I mentioned- they want to help. *I* want to help. But there's not much else we can do unless you tell me who's after you, and why."

"How do I know this isn't all a trick? Maybe that note isn't even true. Someone wrote it just to scare me into talking to you." A note of

desperate, angry, hopeful denial rose in her voice.

April gave the young woman a long look, both serious and gentle. "Anyone coming up with an elaborate lie would be make it a lot more plausible than this, don't you think?"

Such truth made Holly Chambers sag in reluctant agreement. She studied April's face. Perhaps she saw something that gave her confidence, or perhaps she was just too tired of being afraid, but after a long moment, she started to speak, slowly at first, then with gathering speed. "I'm a medical student at NYU. I've been on an Emergency Medicine rotation, working at an urgent care clinic uptown. Last month, I was on a night shift and a patient was brought in who'd just suffered a brain aneurysm. We tried to save him, but those things happen so quickly...

"I know that losing patients is part of being a doctor, but I couldn't forget that guy, and not just because it was the first time it had happened right before my eyes. His case seemed so unusual. He was young, not even thirty, but his blood pressure was through the roof, so I thought maybe drugs were involved. I looked up his chart and found that he'd been admitted to the emergency room just a couple weeks ago with other symptoms: heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, jaundice..."

The waitress came by again with more coffee and April waved her away quickly. Holly continued, "Anyways, I needed to write a paper for school summarizing my rotation experience, and I kept thinking about that one patient, and whether there was anything more that could have been done for him. So I decided to search for other cases of brain aneurysms to compare outcomes. Hopewell Medical Group has a whole bunch of clinics in the metro area, so I searched through the files for recent cases and I discovered something really strange."

Glancing around the near-empty diner anxiously, Holly leaned in closer. "There've been three other cases of fatal brain aneurysms in the past three months. All of the patients were males in their twenties

or thirties. All of them had other presenting symptoms similar to those of the man I had seen on my shift. There was definitely a pattern and it creeped me out. I showed the files to my supervisor, Craig. He was the attending doctor who'd been there that same night. He agreed that a formal review ought to be done, and brought to the attention of the regional health authority. That was over a week ago. I've been trying to get a hold of Craig for the last two days, but he hasn't answered any of my calls or emails. I called into the clinic and found out that he hasn't been at work either." Her voice quavered and she pressed her trembling hands together. "I'm afraid something bad has happened to him."

"Have you told anyone else?" April asked.

"Only my friend, Melissa. I didn't know whether to tell someone else at the clinic, or at med school, or to call the police or what. There'd be nothing for them to go on anyways, all I have is this strange note . But there *is* something really fishy going on, I'm sure of it. I just don't know what to do." Her last few words were barely audible, spoken to the table. Her eyes were moist when she raised them, and they searched April's face with such naked hope that April desperately wanted to promise her that everything would be okay.

Instead she said, "Can you come back to the city? Do you have a place you could stay, that's not your apartment?"

"My dad's out of town," she said. "He's on a trip to the Galapagos, one of the things he's determined to do now that he thinks he doesn't have long to live." She smiled feebly. "I have a key to his place though, I could go there."

"That's a good idea."

"Why? Seems safer to be further away..."

"If I could find you, others can too. It'll be safer for you, and for Melissa, for you to be in Manhattan rather than out here." Seeing Holly's skeptical expression, she said, "Trust me on this one."

"I already have, so I guess I have to go all the way, don't I? I can take the bus in this afternoon." She bit her lip as she looked at April uncertainly. "But then what do we do?"

"We're going to find out what's behind these deaths you discovered... and who wants to keep them a secret badly enough to threaten your life."

Fifteen minutes. She'd kept pointlessly glancing over her shoulder and up at the rooftops as she'd walked back, and now she'd been waiting by her car for fifteen minutes. April drummed her fingers on the hood, then pulled an old grocery store receipt out of her purse and started writing notes on the back of it. *Hopewell Medical Group. Boss: Craig (last name?). What is the connection b/w the 4 men?*

"April."

Donatello's voice right behind her made her jump. She really ought to be used to it now, how quickly and silently they moved. "Geez, Don," she said, putting a hand to her chest. "What took you two so long?"

"Tailing Holly until her friend picked her up," Mike explained.

"C'mon," April said, pulling the driver side door open. "I have a lot to fill you in on."

Donatello nodded as they got in. "Take us through the whole conversation. We could only catch snippets of it. The fan in that restaurant's venting system is really loud."

"You were... *in* there?"

Don waved dismissively. "Never mind that. What did she say?"

They hit traffic on the freeway almost immediately (in the middle of the day for no reason, of course) so she had plenty of time to take

the turtles through everything Holly Chambers had told her. Michelangelo smoothed out the wrinkled receipt she'd written on. "Stevenson," he said. " *Craig* Stevenson. That's the name I saw on one of Snake's photos of his targets that night."

"So odds are he's dead," Don said, grim.

"Hopewell," Mike said to himself. "That name sounds familiar too..."

April glanced at them in the rearview mirror. "Are you sure it was a good idea, sending her back to the city?"

"We can stake out her dad's place, before she gets there tonight," Don said. "It'll be a lot easier to keep tabs on her. Someone has already tried to find her there, so hopefully they won't think to go back so quickly."

April said, "I can start digging into Hopewell. If I get the names of the four men who died, I can run checks on them too."

Donatello noticed the edge of excitement in her voice, and after a moment of concerned silence, he said, "April, you shouldn't feel like you need to get more involved. You've done a lot already."

"It's too late for that, Don. I'm the only one who's actually met her now. I don't want to see her killed, anymore than you do. Besides," she said, "admit it, with Raph and Leo occupied, you could use a hand."

Michelangelo gasped. "I know," he said. "I know where I've seen the name Hopewell Medical Group before. I was sent to break into their building. The same night that Snake was sent to kill Holly Chambers."

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Like something out of a war correspondent's film footage, the inside of Agete headquarters, laid visible through the shattered lower windows that had been their escape way mere days earlier, was bloodstained, gouged by blades and bullets, and littered with glass, broken furniture, and debris. Off to the side of the yellow police tape that cordoned off the perimeter of the building, a couple of uniformed NYPD officers stood speaking together next to their squad cars.

"You figure Doshida ought'a have a hell of an insurance policy," Raphael said, perched on the edge of the rooftop. "Every place he touches ends up trashed."

Leonardo pointed out the structure half a block behind the main one. "The Foot didn't know about the underground corridor to the other building. It looks intact."

"And empty. Whoever made it out of that fight ain't here now."

"It's early yet." Leonardo scanned the rooftops, considering. "You stay on this side. I'll take that upper vantage point on the south end."

When he was in place, Leo had an unobstructed view of Agete's grounds and the road leading up to it. He glanced back to the far end of the rooftop where Raphael crouched one level down, still as a gargoyle. He turned his attention back to the building. As much as they needed to find out what their enemies were up to, the greater part of him hoped that they found nothing; that the night would pass uneventfully. They could use the reprieve.

An hour and a half later, just as he was beginning to think he would get his wish, a black SUV drove up, slowing as it passed the police cars and continuing on, turning in behind the second building where

Doshida had his office and training facility. The driver pulled up right to the back doors and kept the vehicle running. Four men climbed out; two stood guard with guns drawn, the other two darted inside.

Leo flicked his gaze across the roof. Raphael was gone from his perch. He was running along the edge of the roof, a rappelling line held loosely in his hand.

"Shit," Leo cursed under his breath. From a distance, he didn't think Doshida was one of the four men he'd spotted, but Raphael had gotten a closer look. Was he running to better see what was going on, to follow, or to attack? Leo leapt to his feet and sprinted across the rooftop, trying to keep both his brother and the SUV in sight.

Raphael reached the corner of the roof and flung his line around the fire escape railing. It snagged and held a split second before his feet left the ledge and he disappeared down the side of the building.

Damn, he was fast, even when injured and in no state to be taking on a carload of armed men alone. Leo drew his own line as he ran, but before he reached the edge, the two men emerged from the building, one of them carrying a computer hard drive, the other a large cardboard filing box. They hurried back into the vehicle, followed by their two armed companions. The SUV backed up, turned, and sped away.

Leonardo changed direction in mid-stride and ran parallel to the vehicle as it drove down the street below him. It continued straight; he fixed his sight past the edge of the roof, appraising the distance to the next building. His stride lengthened, he put a burst of power into the final three paces and leapt into space.

He knew better than to look down; the balls of his feet hit concrete and he let himself roll, absorbing the impact. He was back on his feet and running, but now there were filaments of pain radiating from the point in his left thigh where he'd been injured only a few nights ago. He ignored them, keeping his focus on the vehicle. It turned left at an intersection. He leapt again, trying to shift more of the landing to his

right leg. Cutting diagonally across the rooftop, he caught sight of the car, stopped at a red light. The next building over was too tall; he dug his hands into climbing spikes and jumped to a window ledge. He hugged the brick wall as he stepped quickly but carefully from ledge to ledge, making his way around the side of the high-rise. To reach the next rooftop, he had to spring almost straight up, hauling himself up by the armpits and swinging his legs over.

The SUV's taillights were turning right. Despite the growing spike of pain in his leg, he raced across the roof, only to discover that the next building over was missing. It had been demolished; a construction crane stood over the naked support pillars of what would be the new structure. The black SUV drove under an overpass and out of sight.

Leonardo lowered himself to one knee, taking the weight off his throbbing leg and letting his breathing and heart rate come down. He examined the street below, making a careful mental note of where he was. The SUV had headed west, towards Hell's Kitchen and the Hudson River. It wasn't much- less than he'd hoped for- but it was something.

Rather than retrace all his climbing and leaping, he decided it would be more prudent to give his leg a rest and find his way back at street level. He rappelled down into an alley and took to the shadows, moving at a steady but unhurried pace, scanning the rooftops for Raphael. He hoped, if they didn't find each other, that Raph would have the good sense to go back to their agreed-upon checkpoint and not take off on his own.

He wondered how Mike and Don were doing; he hadn't seen them since yesterday, and then only for a few minutes when they'd come back to the lair for some stuff and Don had given him a brief and promising update. What a puzzle they were uncovering. If anyone could figure it out, though, Don would...

Even if he hadn't let his guard come down a hair too low, the attack was perfectly silent. He reacted on instinct, throwing himself to the

ground the instant he sensed it. The chain whistled right over him, the blade at the end of it lodged in the mortar where his head had been a moment earlier.

Leonardo was on his feet in a second. Counter-surprise was his only advantage against an ambush; he grabbed the chain and pulled his attacker towards him before the man could think to let go. His hands closed over an arm, he rooted his weight and hurled the man head-first into the wall behind him. He saw two things: the symbol on the man's headband as it flitted past his field of vision on its way towards brick, and the motion of at least two other attackers coming in from either side.

Foot soldiers.

He couldn't let himself be trapped in the middle, against the wall. His katana flew into his hands as he sprang at the nearest opponent, intending to force an opening and pivot behind him. But the man saw immediately what he was trying to do and shifted adeptly to block and counterattack with his own blade. The others closed in quickly.

The shriek of metal on metal reverberated up Leonardo's arms. Propelled into that state of altered consciousness were his body seemed to think for itself, his twin katana took on lives of their own, clashing, parrying, striking. An enemy weapon went spinning through the air past him, the severed hand still attached to the hilt.

His left leg was a fraction too slow; a blade sliced open the calf. He didn't feel pain, not at first. Only mild surprise when the swordsman pitched forward, the tip of a sai protruding from his throat. Like a small nuclear bomb, Raphael's presence cleared a circle of destruction upon impact. Leo recovered his footing, felt his battle senses reach and join his brother's, so it seemed as though their breathing, their heartbeats, fell into sync and they became two limbs of the same creature of war. The Foot pressed back in, recklessly malevolent, sensing, rightly, that only by attacking all at once did they stand a chance, not just of winning, but of surviving.

" *Teishi* !" The sharp call cut through the fight. The Foot soldiers fell back reluctantly.

Raphael's burning gaze swept across the circle of black-clad fighters. "What are you waiting for?" he growled.

One of the Foot soldiers stepped through the circle, a big man with a scarred face. His authority and the stripes on his headband denoted his senior rank. His hard, assessing gaze took in the two turtles, weakened but fearsome, his eight remaining soldiers, and the handful already lying moaning or silent on the ground. He said, "You will come with us to Kan- *Jonin.* He will speak with you."

"Oh he will, will he?" Raph shifted his stance, coiled to attack. "Seems his message is pretty damn clear."

Leonardo made the same rapid calculation that the Foot captain had. He straightened up and met the man's eyes. "We'll come," he said.

Raphael's face spoke plainer than words. *What the fuck, Leo* ?

"You will not fight," the Foot captain declared.

"We won't fight. If we aren't attacked."

The captain grunted in acknowledgement and made a signal to his soldiers. They stowed their weapons, though not their hateful and suspicious glares. Leonardo returned his swords to their scabbards and turned a look on his brother. Raphael's knuckles whitened around the hilts of his sais. He slid them into his belt, his jaw clenched.

The Foot captain spoke rapid words in Japanese to his men, instructing two of them to handle the dead and wounded. Leonardo knelt and pulled off his mask to tie his calf wound. He was lucky the blade had sliced along the muscle rather than across it; he could have been hamstrung. It was deep and bleeding copiously though. He yanked the fabric tight. Raphael stood over him, scowling. "You

know what the hell you're doing?" he said, his voice fast and low. "Letting them walk us over to meet Kan and a few dozen more Foot? On their turf, their terms? We can win if we fight here."

"Maybe. But not without taking a lot more hits. Then where'd we be? Too injured to fight, to find Doshida, to help Don and Mike. It's what the Rising Hand would want, isn't it? The Foot are in the same boat. Maybe Kan will listen to reason."

" *Reason* ," Raphael echoed with a contemptuous snort. "Reason's got nothing to do with how the Foot feel about us."

The Foot captain stepped up with his remaining six soldiers. Three of them led the way forward; the captain and the other three spaced out and escorted them from behind. Leonardo put his leg down and felt it burn but walked forward without favoring it, determined not to betray the extent of his injury. Wordlessly, knowingly, Raphael fell into stride on his left side. His eyes kept twitching, expecting, daring the men to change their minds and give him a reason to finish what he'd started.

They cut through alleys and side streets, the Foot always close enough to strike, and positioned so that they could not escape. By the time they reached the Foot compound, Leonardo could no longer conceal his limp. He could tell that Raphael was hurting as well, though he hid it beneath a fierce glower. They'd been weakened by the journey and would soon be surrounded by fresh warriors. Raph was right; what had he done?

It was too late. The sentries pulled open the gate and they were swept in by their posse of guards.

Last summer, the Foot compound had resembled a construction zone; now it was a battlefield camp. On a row of cots, lined up against the wall of the now-completed west wing of the main building, lay the bodies of several men wrapped in funeral shrouds, casualties from the past week. A couple dozen soldiers were arrayed in the compound, being drilled in sword work. A pile of weapons was

being repaired. Kan Masataro was in the center of it all, in conversation with a lieutenant.

At their entry, the entire courtyard fell silent. The captain with the scarred face approached Kan with a low bow, speaking quickly as the Foot leader walked towards them. The ninjas that had accompanied them stepped back, as others stopped what they'd been doing and drew forward in curiosity. Leonardo and Raphael became the center of a ring, alone with Kan.

No one spoke. Raphael emanated tension like light from a bulb. It crashed against the hostile stares pressing in from all sides. Kan regarded them, not in the respectful manner he had last fall, but like a general considering what to do with dangerous prisoners of war.

"So you have declared yourselves enemies of the Foot Clan after all." He spoke slowly, in English. Perhaps now they were beneath being addressed in Japanese.

Leonardo met the man's gaze calmly. "It is the Foot that have attacked us. Twice."

"You have allied yourselves with the traitor, Saito Doshida. So you must be willing to share his fate."

"You're mistaken," Leo said. "And acting against your own interests. The night we met with Doshida, we were opposing his plans to carry out assassinations. Your soldiers thought we were collaborating and attacked us just for being there. We haven't allied with the Rising Hand or acted against the Foot."

"Have you not?" Kan motioned to one of his lieutenants, who approached with a laptop computer. Leonardo blinked at the jarringly incongruous sight. Kan opened the computer, hit a couple keys, and turned it around so that the turtles could see the screen.

For several seconds, Leonardo couldn't tell what he was looking at. It appeared to be a video, shot from slightly above, of a group of

people making their way down a deserted street. Not a real street though, a fake one, like a movie set. Then he recognized Tami's blue hair, and the kid that had been named Ren. And then, clearly, damningly, Michelangelo's unmistakable figure entered the frame. "That's better." Mike's voice, sounding distant and tinny on the laptop speaker, was audible to the utterly silent crowd in the courtyard. "Let's try it again, work on what I've been teaching you about choosing your cover..."

Kan shut the laptop with a snap. A whisper of outrage rippled outward through the circle of assembled Foot. Leonardo imagined he heard Raphael's thoughts projected at him telepathically: *Now do you agree we're fucked?*

Though his mind spun furiously, Leo kept his gaze forward and level as the leader of the Foot Clan came up next to him. "You are responsible?"

What other answer could there be? "Yes."

With a startlingly loud crack, Kan's staff came down hard across the back of his calves. Pain engulfed his left leg as he went down to his knees.

Raphael's reaching, murderous hands closed on air. Kan stepped aside deftly as the turtle, snarling vociferous curses, was slammed to the ground by half a dozen Foot soldiers moving in unison.

"Your lives are forfeit," Kan stated loudly, and there was a murmur of assent. "You have given up your chance to preserve peace with the Foot."

" *Peace* ?" Raphael spat the word as if it were poison. He'd been dragged to his knees and his arms pinned. "Peace with the Foot is a *joke* . The Foot are a bunch of crooks! You act like you're noble, carrying on a tradition from the sixteenth century, when you're just another horde of gangsters preying on the city. There could never be

peace- it doesn't matter if it's the Shredder, Karai, *you* , who gives a shit-"

Someone silenced Raphael by striking him across the barely-healed right side of his face, splitting open the thin new skin. For a second he was stunned, blinking the blood from his eye, then Leonardo could see it, the swell of violent abandon glazing over Raph's vision, suffusing his limbs. He would throw off the hands that held him and fight like a thing possessed. And Leo would fight with him, and they would die.

He thought: this is where Karai knelt, when she bore the weight of her clan's defeat.

"Kan!" Leonardo swung all attention to himself with the sharp challenge in his voice. Firmly, deliberately, he rose to his feet and faced the Clan leader. "That video was delivered to you, anonymously, sometime yesterday or today, wasn't it? You know it was sent by Saito Doshida. I'll swear again- we've no allegiance to him; what you saw on the screen was an act of desperation. Surely you see that this-" he swung his arm out to encompass their situation, "only plays to his advantage."

Kan was stone-faced. "Perhaps. But insult and treachery must be answered."

"We will not die without fighting." Leonardo glanced meaningfully to either side, letting the *jonin* follow his thoughts as he judged how many men he and Raphael could kill before they went down. "And we have brothers who will avenge us." He lowered his voice and spoke only to Kan now. "Consider your position. Think of your clan."

Kan stared long and hard at Leo. The gathered ninjas, and even Raphael, seemed to be holding their breath. Finally Kan said, "Shrewd, *kappa* creature that you are, nevertheless you speak sense. So as not to further weaken our clans- we settle this on their behalf." He stepped back, motioning aside his Foot soldiers, and drew his katana slowly, sliding out the gleaming and finely

hammered blade, inch by gleaming inch, until he held it poised, somberly and ceremoniously.

"My brother leaves here alive," Leo said.

"What are you doing?" Raphael blurted.

Leo ignored him, acknowledging only Kan's curt nod. Win or lose, a decent save, he thought, from certain death for both of them and ultimate victory for the Rising Hand. He drew his own katana and took a long, steady breath, tapping into his deepest reserves of strength, setting aside the knowledge that he would be fighting lame and wounded against a master swordsman, trying to make himself, as Splinter described it, a creature purely of the moment, unattached and indifferent to victory or defeat.

"Wait!" Raphael's eyes were wild.

Kan began to move, the edge of his blade sweeping silently through air.

"I can give you Doshida!"

Kan paused. He turned slightly to regard Raphael with disdainfully narrowed eyes.

"What's that worth to you? More than this farce?" Raphael held onto the man's gaze with frightening, reckless intensity.

"How can you offer such a thing?" Kan kept his sword raised, daring the turtle to admit his desperate and ridiculous lie.

"You think that video was something? Well, get this - *I* saved Doshida from being executed when he first turned traitor to the Foot. I hid him, I helped him, *I* told him to build the Rising Hand. All 'cause I wanted to see the Foot bite the dust."

Leonardo stared. *Dear God, what does he think he's doing?*

There was complete silence. Kan focused on Raphael as if seeing him clearly for the first time. A slow flush of rage began creeping up his neck into his stern and weathered face.

Raphael smiled. "So, here's the deal, see? You can take that sword you got out, and kill me. Try to, at least. Or, I find Doshida, I bring him to you, and we call it good. What'dya say?"

Kan's mouth twisted in a kind of bitter amusement. "We will find that traitor without your... assistance."

"Like you did last year at the boathouse? Or just a few days ago in his own building, when he mowed your men down with darts and bullets? And lemme guess- his two bodyguards- kinda *unusually* strong and fast, weren't they? Seems to me, if I were placing bets, I'd put my money on him."

Why, WHY is he so good at making people want to kill him?
Leonardo kept his katana ready and shifted to move with Kan as the man took a step forward, his face reddening. Without flinching, Raphael plowed on, "Don't get me wrong, you've done a bang-up job training the sorry lot that you inherited from Karai. But if anyone can get to Doshida, I will. What've you got to lose? Only the satisfaction of killing us right now."

"Which would be significant."

"No doubt."

Kan squinted at the turtle, trying to determine if his goading was a sincere death wish. "You expect that I will let you walk out, trusting that you will do as you say?"

Raphael shrugged. "I'm good for my word, but I'll tell you something else. I'd go after Doshida anyways. He's fucked with me and my family one too many times. We were out looking for him tonight, before your crew jumped us. If you don't believe me, ask him." He jerked his head towards Leo. "I would've beaten you to him too. So

now, instead of killing him, I'll bring him to you. Same outcome, ain't it? But you get the credit with those bigwigs in Japan - worth something, am I right?"

Leonardo was not sure whether to be mortified or impressed. He'd rarely heard Raphael speak at such length - with a style that could only be described as borderline suicidal yet perversely persuasive. Raphael had a small, daring smirk on his face. The trickle of blood from his open cheek had run down his neck and pooled in the shallow crevice between his collarbone and plastron. His eyes looked more than a little mad; Leo was certain only he could detect the hint of apprehension. At that moment, Leonardo could see Kan's thoughts written on his face. *What demon creature IS this? And is it better to use it, or kill it?*

Kan lowered his sword and sheathed it. "I agree to your proposal." He motioned to his Foot soldiers, who unhanded Raphael a little roughly, but who stepped back from him as quickly as possible, as if letting go of a grenade. "However, I require more assurance that you will give me what you promise." He pointed to Leonardo. "He will stay, until you return."

Raphael's smirk vanished. "No fucking w-"

"I accept," Leo cut in.

Raphael's expression went from merely frightening to downright terrifying. Leonardo had one thought: get him out of here before he ruins his own success. Quickly, he sheathed his katana and said to Kan, with a slight bow, "You are a man of honor. I trust your hospitality."

"Hospitality?" Raphael hissed, starting to quiver like a taut wire.

"If I might speak with my brother for a moment?"

Kan inclined his head.

Leonardo stepped up to Raph and turned them away from the watching Foot. "You've gotten us this far, don't wreck it," he whispered.

"You're offering yourself as a *hostage* ? To the Foot? You think I'm gonna-"

"I'm not offering. You heard Kan- we don't have a choice. It's not much, but that car tonight - it turned west into Hell's Kitchen. Go to Don and Mike - they're on to something. Raph, listen to me." He grabbed his brother by the arm and looked into his face. "Don't go after Doshida at the expense of protecting Chambers. If you can't come back, *don't."*

Raphael's face seemed to drain of feeling, going limp, agony left in his eyes.

"Have you decided?" Kan asked.

"Yes." Leonardo gripped his brother's arm tightly for one more second, then let go and stepped back.

"Your katana," Kan said.

Wordlessly, Leonardo unstrapped his scabbards and handed them over.

"I will give you ten days," Kan said to Raphael. "After which, I will assume you have failed or betrayed our agreement." To Leonardo, "Then you will answer for your clan, with your life, as you were prepared to do."

Leo replied expressionlessly, "If it comes to that."

" *G ē to o hiraku* ," Kan called out sharply, and the sentries at the gate pulled it open. A line of ninja stepped forward from either side to escort Raphael out, cutting him off from where Kan and Leonardo stood. Raphael's entire body tensed, as though, like a frayed cable,

he would snap after all. Leonardo held his breath. He found himself remembering his brother leaping forward and hurling shuriken to clear them an escape path out of battle. *Go, dammit. Go.*

Raphael turned and went. The gate shut behind him.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

If Michelangelo were to describe the life of a ninja, he might say that it was a lot of watching, waiting and stalking, punctuated by bursts of explosive violence. Mastery of the violent parts was something that took years and years of training, but at this moment, as he stood tucked in the darkness of the alleyway next to Chuck's Bar and Grill, inhaling the maddening scent of fries, grilled meat and beer, trying to pick out individual voices from the rising and falling burble of conversation, and passing his eyes over every person that entered and exited the dim, narrow front doorway, Michelangelo was sure that the long, unglamorous stretches of ninja work were even harder.

It was the third night he'd been here and he was starting to think it was a dead end, despite the fact that the bartender had confirmed over the phone that the man he was looking for was indeed a regular. But who knew- with all that had happened over the last week, perhaps he'd changed his routine or skipped town...

Mike zeroed in on a figure walking up to the entrance, a man with a quick, almost spastic manner, wearing a ball cap and a jacket that hung too loosely on his slight frame. Bingo. An unnatural shadow detaching itself from a wall, Mike left his lookout spot and sidled up to his target as the man's hand reached for the door handle.

"Hey, Simon." Mike pushed the rim of his hat up, just enough.

His old squad member gave a backpedalling start, almost knocking into a public waste bin. "Mike? Wh-what are you doing here?"

"If I could go in, I'd offer to buy you a beer." He smiled, genuinely pleased to see the twitchy little hacker. The only member of Roku Squad not angry at him or dead. "Maybe we could talk out here where it's less crowded."

"Talk? Now? Uh, err, okay..."

"Hey dude, it's just me. Why so jumpy?"

Simon shrugged and shook his head and glanced around, all at the same time. "No, no reason. Sure, let's...talk, I guess."

"How about over there?"

They crossed the street to a small public park. Its small lawn and stone benches, surrounding a large ornamental sundial, were dark and nearly empty this late in the evening. Mike said, "So where have you been?"

"Just laying low, doing a few side jobs here and there. I got a call from Tami, telling me to hold tight, they're going to get assignments up and running again as soon as they sort out the mess with the main building..."

"So you heard about what happened, then?"

Simon scrunched into the overly large neck of his jacket and looked down at the ground. "I heard about Ren. Poor kid. I really liked him."

"Me too." For several seconds, they didn't speak, both staring somberly through the gloom of the park to the orange streetlights receding down the sidewalk on the other side. Mike didn't give voice to his thoughts, he didn't say, "I was there. I tried to get to him, but I didn't make it in time. I saw him die." But somehow, the knowledge that Simon, this one man with whom he had almost nothing in common, could silently commiserate with him in a way that his brothers could not was something for which he was unexpectedly grateful.

Simon broke the silence. "It's pretty crazy, isn't it? This other Asian gang, the Foot¸ I guess they really have a grudge against Saito, huh?"

"Yeah, they do." Mike studied his toes. He might as well ask. "When you talked to Tami, did she say anything... about me?"

Simon hesitated. "She said...you weren't on our side anymore. That you killed Snake." His eyes darted around like nervous birds. "Err...did you?"

Mike sighed. "Not exactly, but it's complicated." He considered saying, "Snake was some sort of super soldier assassin," as well as "If he wasn't dead, I would be," and "Technically, I didn't kill him, my brother did." None of these seemed like they would take the conversation in a good direction, certainly not the one direction he actually needed it go. Instead he pressed, "Did she say where she is? Or anything about Doshida and where he's gone?"

He realized right away that he'd probed a little too far and too eagerly. Simon shook his head hastily, without looking him in the face. "No, no, she didn't. You know, nothing personal, but I'm not sure I ought to be talking to you. I mean, I don't know how things stand between you and Saito, and I don't want to get on anyone's bad side...you know how it is..." He started to back away, as if he was going to make a dash back across the street, to the safety of the restaurant and human company.

Mike held his hands up. "Sorry, my bad- for putting you on the spot like that. Forget it, really. It's not the reason I wanted to talk to you."

Simon stopped backing away. "So...what is the reason then?"

"You remember that last job? The one where I took you guys underground to get into that office building?"

"Yeah, sure." Simon shuddered at the memory.

"Can you tell me what we did? I mean, on the computer end of it, what exactly did you do?"

"You know. We copied some files." Simon shrugged, the tension in the movement of his shoulders betraying his suspicion.

Mike kept his tone nonchalant. "What files?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Picking his words carefully now, Mike said, "I know someone who works at the place we broke into, Hopewell Medical Group. She's convinced there's something fishy going on at that company, some sort of cover-up. I'll bet it's no coincidence that we were sent to get files out of there. If I know what was taken, I can help her, give her some idea of what they're trying to hide."

Simon's over-caffeinated fingers did a nervous jig on his thighs. "I don't think I should be saying-"

"It won't get back to anyone that I even talked to you. Not Tami, not Saito; I'm not in touch with them anymore. The reason I need to know is because this person I mentioned, she's been threatened." Mike searched Simon's face. Criminal hacker and data pirate that the man was, perhaps an anti-establishment angle would elicit some sympathy. "She doesn't have anything to do with Agete, or the Foot, or anyone we know. She's just a whistle-blower in a tight spot. I don't want to see her hurt."

Simon wet his lips. Hesitantly, he said, "The job was to copy over all the patient files from New York metro clinics dating back to the beginning of the year."

When he stopped, Mike said, dubiously, "That's it?"

Simon stopped the jiggling of his fingers by stuffing them into the pockets of his jeans. "No, I also infected their system with a virus-one that corrupts only certain files so they can't be retrieved or read."

"What kinds of files?"

"Patient files with a certain name coded in the employer field: Alliant Operations. And any variations, like Alliant Ops., or just Alliant." He took his ball cap off and ran his hand through his badly disheveled hair before jamming the hat back on. "There, that's it. That's all I know, okay?"

Mike nodded. "Thanks." Then, because he didn't know what else to say, and because it was true, he said, "It was good seeing you again."

"You know, Mike," Simon said, some of the tension coming out of his shoulders, "I really don't know what to think about all this. I mean, working for Saito... well, the pay's really great, and the people he's getting are crazy skilled. Like, I wouldn't even have believed you were *real* , and you turned out to be pretty swell in my book. But Snake's dead, and Ren's dead... and I'm not even a fighter like they were, I'm not cut out for that kind of shit..." The words poured out of him quickly, like water tripping over rocks, as if he'd been needing to say them for a while. "I don't know...maybe I should just keep out of all this." He looked up at Michelangelo questioningly, as if, for some reason, he trusted him.

"I think that would be a good idea," Mike said. He stepped off the curb and melted into shadow, knowing that he would be lost to sight within seconds. "Good luck, Simon."

Donatello nudged aside the stacks of paper on the small folding card table, clearing a patch of space for his coffee mug amidst all the pages of information he and April had hurriedly dug up. "Alliant Operations," he explained, "is a private military and security services contractor."

Michelangelo squinted one eye. "So, like, soldiers for hire?"

"Exactly." Donatello glanced at his laptop, then back at his brother. "April pulled up all the press she could find on them. They're competing for some big military contracts."

"And Hopewell?"

"Is the network medical care provider for their New York offices."

Michelangelo put down the paper bag he'd just brought from the lair (bagels, juice and power bars - they had to eat after all) and looked for a place to sit down. While he had been tracking down Simon, Don had set this place up with the bare essentials, those being, in his judgment, his computer, a bunch of electronic devices whose function Mike could not discern, a table to set them on, the coffee maker, and a couple wool blankets to sleep under. Otherwise, the generic white walls, beige carpet, and linoleum kitchen were bare. They dared not give away their presence by turning on lights, so the overhead stove lamp and the glow of the computer screen were the only sources of illumination besides the faint lightening of the sky emanating through the closed blinds. It certainly wasn't much to call home, even temporarily. But that was just as well, since they were occupying it illegally and had to be ready to grab the computer and papers and exit out the window if anyone actually came to the door on account of the For Rent sign, now hidden away in the closet.

As if on cue, there was a knock, followed, thankfully, by April's voice whispering, "It's me." Donatello let her in, and she closed the door behind her quietly. Crossing the room and opening a crack in the dusty aluminum blinds with her fingers, she peered out the ground story window, craning her neck to look down the block at their surveillance target, the lighted four-story brownstone townhouse of Dr. Evan Chambers. "Everything okay over here?"

"Yep," Donatello said, taking a quick look at his computer screen again, "Everything's working." As soon as they'd gotten back into the city, Don had installed a hidden makeshift security system around the doctor's home. Sensors leading up to the townhouse and around every point of entrance now fed information to his computer.

"Thank goodness for the bad housing market. The place next door is empty too," April commented. "Have Leo and Raph been over here yet?"

Mike shook his head. "They were scouting Doshida's headquarters tonight."

"I was just filling Mike in on Alliant," Don said.

"Let me see if I'm following," Michelangelo said. "Four unusual and similar deaths, all in the last few months. Holly notices and tells her boss. Someone hires Agete to kill both Holly and Craig, as well as wipe the records of the strange deaths out of Hopewell's computer system by getting rid of all the files of patients who work at Alliant."

Don added, "So if, in fact, Alliant is the client we've been looking for- and it seems logical to infer that they are- the question is, what's their secret? Why are they are so intent on covering up the deaths of their own people?"

Giving up on a chair materializing itself, Mike hopped up on the kitchen counter and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyeballs. "Man, this is getting weird. Like, conspiracy theory, something-I-saw-in-a-movie, kind of weird. How are we supposed to go up against a military company to keep Holly safe? Especially if the proof has been erased?"

"Not all of it has," April said. She pulled a sheaf of paper out of her bag. "I went and checked in on Holly yesterday and she showed me these. Printouts of the case files she'd emailed to herself when she was first looking into this."

Don flipped through the pages, his eye ridges drawing downwards as he read. "There's so much medical jargon, and all these abbreviations," he muttered, largely to himself. "I can barely understand half this page."

A broad smile spread across Mike's face. "I can't believe I just heard you say that. That's going on my wall of priceless quotes." Then he snorted in a fit of suppressed laughter. "Right next to that time when you were leading bo practice and Raph said, 'My staff is longer and kinda bent out of shape.' Remember that?"

April covered her giggles behind her hand, and Don shook his head, trying, but failing, not to indulge Mike with a grin. "Back on track," he said, "Could Alliant be somehow responsible for all these medical problems and the deaths of these people?"

With effort, Mike composed himself and came around to read over Don's shoulder. "Boy, you're right. This really *is* gobbledygook. What's hep-a-to...?"

"Hepatotoxicity. Hepatic is the liver. Or is it the spleen? No wait, that's *lymphatic.* The liver then- something wrong with the liver."

"Subconjunctival hemorrhage?"

"Conjunctivitis - the eye, I think. Bleeding of the eyes."

"How about pulmonary-" Mike's mouth fell open. "Snake."

"What?"

"The guy I told you about, the one that Doshida sent to kill Holly. His eyes, I got a good look at them in the fight, and they were freaky-bulging and bloody. Subconjunctive whats-it."

Donatello blinked once, hard, before his eyes fixed on some imaginary point in space somewhere above Mike's shoulder. It was not difficult to imagine that behind it, there was a whirring and clicking of gears connecting, falling neatly into place, like the parts of a machine fitting together in his skilled hands. "Holly said she suspected some sort of drug overdose was involved in these deaths, didn't she?"

When April nodded, Mike said, "A drug that Snake was taking too, then."

"Some serum that might have made him unusually fast and strong, able to take on you and Raph together." Don's voice dropped to

almost a whisper. "One guess as to who would have the know-how to create something like that."

Michelangelo's eyes widened and his mouth formed the word *whoa* soundlessly.

"Doshida is supplying Alliant with his drugs. Drugs that enhance the abilities of their soldiers, but that are killing some of their people." Don shook his head, as if annoyed that he hadn't seen it earlier. "No wonder he wouldn't back off the hit. There is no client. To protect the secrecy of his business, Doshida himself ordered the assassination of Holly Chambers."

April's cell phone rang, startling them all. She grabbed it quickly, looked at the screen and said, "It's Casey." When she answered it, though, her expression became worried and quizzical. "Raph? What-? Yeah, they're right here."

She handed the phone to Michelangelo, who flinched, holding the device away from his ear as his brother's voice started barreling at him loud and fast. "Raph, *Raph* , *slow down* . What's happened?"

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

It wasn't the first time he'd woken up totally confused, feeling like shit. By this point in his life, Raphael had a short list of go-to questions for such occasions.

Was he close to death, moderately injured, or merely hung over? He moved each limb very slightly and, encouraged by his ability to do so, lifted his head, his cheek peeling off the ribbed fabric that had imprinted its pattern on his skin through a thin film of drool. He turned over slowly, and a dozen protesting aches flared up like a mountainside of wildfires across his body. Moderately injured, then.

Was he safely underground, or somewhere vulnerable? There was deep red light on his eyelids; not at all a good sign. He lifted them to see long orange shafts of late evening sunlight falling through the blinds and across the lumpy sofa he was lying on. It seemed to take his brain longer than usually necessary to recognize Casey's living room.

Final question: what was the last thing he could clearly remember?

The answer to that made him jolt to his feet, furious at himself for having slept so long, even though his body immediately informed him that it could do with another thirty-six straight hours of unconsciousness.

He had staggered in the door just before dawn, the unrelenting stranglehold of his emotions having propelled him well past the point when physical collapse would have been sensible. Barely managing to answer any of Casey's shaving cream-flecked, obscenity-punctuated demands for an explanation, he'd exchanged a frenzied phone conversation with Mike and Don, during which, he recalled, he'd done a lot of fevered cursing of the Foot, Kan, Doshida, and

Leonardo, before one of his brothers, he couldn't remember which, managed to convince him to hold tight at Casey's for the day and meet them as soon as the sun was down.

"Casey!" he hollered. "Casey! Casey!" He thrust his head into the kitchen, the bedroom and the bathroom before he heard the front door opening.

"Christ Almighty, the whole street can hear you. I was just in the garage, alright?" Casey threw his coat and keys on the table with an uncharitable glare. He was still sore over Raphael taking off with his motorcycle last week, leaving him for forty-eight hours under the impression that it had been stolen. Raph thought the fact that he'd been in life-or-death combat twice during that time ought to count towards forgiveness, but the man was funny about his bike that way.

Casey reached into the fridge for a can of soda, and looking at his friend, relented and offered him one. "You just wake up? You look like crap."

"Thanks a lot. Why'd you let me sleep that long? What time is it?"

"Chill out, the sun's barely gone down, you couldn't have left much earlier. 'Sides, you looked like you needed it, bad."

Raphael downed the can in three gulps and began rummaging on the coffee table. He found a pen and tore the back off of a junk mail envelope. As he scrawled a note on the paper, he said, "I gotta go, but I need a favor."

"Sure, show up at God-awful times, crash all day, and split. You're welcome and 'course I'll do you a favor." He made a disgusted noise through his nose. "What is it?"

Raph handed Casey the note he'd written. "Can you take it to Splinter tonight?" He added, "Please."

"You're kidding me. You haven't told him, have you?" Casey brandished the torn paper between them in disbelief. "And you're gonna get *me* to do it, with *this* ?"

"I didn't have time to go back, and I don't now," he retorted. That wasn't true. Last night, he'd gone right past the junction that would have taken him to the lair, and had come here instead. Going home meant looking Splinter in the face and explaining that he'd abandoned his father's favorite son to the Foot. Even to Casey, he didn't want to admit he couldn't do it. "I'll owe you," he pressed. "I'll friggin' wax your bike with a toothbrush."

Either his face betrayed him or Casey wasn't his friend for nothing because he grumbled, "I'll do it, but you know it's not right." Then, looking at him with firm reassurance, "You'll get him back."

Raphael threw a brief look of gratitude over his shoulder as he opened Casey's window and dropped out into the dusk. He felt ashamed, knowing how little information and even less comfort his hastily scribbled words would give his sensei, but he'd had nothing else to say.

Sensei,

The Foot have Leo.

I'll bring them Doshida and get him back. Don't worry, I won't come back without him.

Raphael

Donatello watched his brother pace back and forth, back and forth, agitatedly, like a lion in a circus cage. *He's going to wear a rut in the carpet* , Don thought. He exchanged glances with Michelangelo, who was leaning, arms folded, against the wall, and who lifted his eye ridges in a nervous, 'now what?'

"Raph, are you listening?" Don asked.

With his teeth, Raphael ripped off a hunk of the bagel he had in his hand (the only thing he'd eaten since yesterday, Don figured) and said, between chews, "Yeah. So? What does all this mean?" He made an encompassing gesture at the computer, the papers, and presumably, the entire situation Don had been trying to explain to him.

"It means," Don said patiently, "We might be able to save Holly, and deal a major blow to Agete's business, if we can expose the fact that Doshida's been selling dangerous performance-enhancing drugs to a government military contractor."

Raphael stopped his pacing and pinned Don with an expectant ' *and?'* tilt of his head. "Did you hear what *I* said? Leo is in the *Foot compound."*

Donatello's stomach knotted at the words, but he said evenly, "I heard you. Several times."

"Who knows what they're doing to him," Raph muttered, pacing again, a vein starting to bulge on his neck.

"They're not going to kill him, not right away," Don said. "And I may be wrong, but Kan doesn't strike me as a sadist. Presuming he has control over his soldiers, they'll wait and see what we do, whether we deliver on what you promised."

Raphael choked on a pained laugh. "Look, I ran my mouth off for all it was worth, and then some. I don't have a clue where Doshida is. So are you gonna tell me how all this sleuthing of yours is gonna help gift wrap and deliver him?"

"I don't know yet," Don admitted. "But if the heat gets turned up on his business, Doshida's bound to show himself."

"We can't wait for that." Raphael swallowed the rest of the bagel in two chews and grabbed his sai, giving them a quick visual inspection before holstering them on his belt. "Leo saw the car that left Agete's building head into Hell's Kitchen. We might as well start there."

"Now?" Mike asked.

"No, next week. What do you think? C'mon, grab your gear." Seeing Mike and Don exchanging a look, he demanded, "What is it?"

"We can't leave Holly unprotected," Mike said. "She's the reason we're even camped out in this place."

Raphael blinked, then burst out with, "Well, we're sure as hell not sitting on our asses in here all night, waiting. Not with Leo in-"

"What did Leo say?"

"What?"

Donatello walked up to Raphael, facing him with a calm, steady gaze. "What did Leo say?" When Raph didn't answer immediately, Don continued, "He must have said something to you, about what to do after you got out. He wants us to keep protecting Chambers. Doesn't he?"

He could see he was right. Raphael averted his gaze, resentful shame flashing briefly across his face, like a lightning storm. "Fine, then. You stay." He shot a challenge to Michelangelo as he headed for the door. "Are *you* coming?"

"Yeah. I am." Mike put a hand on Donatello's shoulder as he passed him. The pressure of the squeeze he gave it, supportive, reassuring, lingered after he'd followed Raphael out into the night and the dark apartment was silent.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

"This is all of it." From her shoulder bag, April pulled out one of the several copies of the CD that Donatello had burned for her that morning, setting it down on Evan Chambers's marble kitchen counter, and watching Holly's reaction as she picked up the thin plastic case. "Are you sure you're ready to go through with this?"

The young woman smiled, tentatively, relief and anxiety pulling at the corners of her eyes. "I think so. I can't pretend none of this ever happened, can I?"

"No, I guess not."

Holly put the CD down carefully, as if it might bite her, then cupped both her hands around the mug she held, her arms tight against her side, as if she could draw the heat of the cup into herself. "Do you do this regularly? Swoop mysteriously into people's lives and battle evil organizations?"

April laughed out loud, then checked herself when she saw that Holly wasn't laughing with her. Of course, why would it be funny to her? This well-educated, privileged girl would never expect to have strange, criminal, violent things happen in her orbit, much less laugh about them. It had only been a couple of days ago that she'd learned Craig Stevenson had been found dead in his apartment from an apparent heart attack, although he'd had no history of any heart conditions.

"No," April answered her sincerely. "Not regularly. Believe it or not, I live a pretty normal life most of the time." It was just that her standards of normal were different. Normal was a low-key weekend dinner in an underground lair with her extended family of mutants. Normal was a week without any terrifying crises.

This was not one of those weeks. Not with Leo a captive of the Foot.

Holly waited for April to say more, then sighed when she didn't. "You're really not going to tell me anything else, are you? I'll never know what went on with my dad. Or how you found out about all this. Or who 'M' is."

"M is a good person." There was no need for any caveat there, at least. "But he lives in a scarier world than we're used to, one that most people don't see much of. Do you really want in on it?"

She hesitated, like Alice pausing at the lip of the rabbit hole, being told that there was no way back. "I'm not sure."

"Then maybe it's enough just to deal with *this* ," April said gently, putting a finger on the CD case. "To try and get your life back."

After a long moment, Holly nodded.

April dialed the first of the numbers she would be calling today. She waited on the line, afraid she'd get voicemail, but on the fourth ring it picked up. "Hi Russell," she started cheerily, "it's April O'Neil... It *has* been a long time, hasn't it?... I'm doing good, how about you? How have things been since you moved to *The Times?* ... Listen, I have something hot that I think you ought to pick up."

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

The same trainee, a skinny solemn teenager that looked to be about fourteen years old, brought him the same tray at the same time each day. Perhaps the rigid punctuality was a deliberate reminder of his status as a captive. The sliding screen door would open a crack, just enough for the tray to fit through. The boy would kneel and push it inside the room, looking determined to keep his eyes on the floor, but almost always flicking them up for a brief second or two to catch a glimpse of Leonardo, as if he were a mythological monster come to life, imprisoned but still so dangerous that looking at him could be deadly, like looking straight at the sun or into the eyes of the Gorgon. Then the door would shut again.

The tray that had just arrived had a bowl of rice with some assorted vegetables, a cup of tea, and a bowl of warm water with gauze pads and a roll of cloth dressing next to it. Leonardo unwrapped yesterday's dressing from his leg, washed the wound and redressed it. It was healing up nicely after five days of forced rest, a luxury he knew his brothers did not have.

He ate the rice and vegetables using the accompanying chopsticks, his mind, as it usually was, on his family and how they were faring. The room he'd been ensconced in didn't offer much to distract him from worry. Hidden away in the basement level of the main building, it had probably been a storage room, converted into a detention space for Foot soldiers who merited punishment. It was small, not much bigger than a cell, windowless, lit by a naked overhead light bulb, with no furniture, just tatami mats laid over concrete and a tiny sink and toilet. He couldn't complain. The Foot soldiers roaming upstairs and outside would no doubt prefer to see him shackled to the floor of a dank, vermin-infested cave and routinely beaten with sharp and heavy implements. For some reason he did not quite understand, Kan had seen to it that he was comfortable and

unmolested, at least, it seemed, for the ten days allotted. After that, he would probably be killed.

That brought him back to pondering his situation. He was afraid that if, after ten days, his brothers were empty-handed, and hadn't already been maimed or killed by Doshida's gun-toting super soldiers, Raphael would try something momentously stupid, such as storming the Foot compound. He would never get to this tiny room in the deepest bowels of the building. It would be suicidal. That meant Leo would have to find a way out before that happened.

There were two very nervous-looking guards outside the screen door. Nervous because they knew, as he did, that they were there just for the sake of appearances. If anything, they functioned to prevent other Foot soldiers from approaching. He could easily kill two guards. He could not escape a fortified compound full of ninjas.

He left the tray by the door. When he heard the screen slide open, he expected it would be the same prompt trainee retrieving it. Instead, when he turned, he was surprised to see Kan Masataro's silhouette in the doorway.

Neither of them spoke. Finally, Leonardo inclined his head. "Masataro-san."

Kan's face was hidden in the shadow of the doorway. His deep, deliberate voice said, in Japanese, "I once knew a man named Hamato Yoshi."

Leonardo said nothing.

"He was a well-known and respected senior *chonin* when I was just a boy. In many ways, he was like an uncle to me. I looked up to him a great deal. He could have become *jonin* of one of the Clan branches, had he not been undone by his rivalry with the Oruku family."

Leonardo remained silent; he did not know how to respond, and his brain needed extra seconds to make the switch to Japanese. Kan took a step into the room, his eyes never leaving his prisoner's face, studying it with the immense curiosity and guarded revulsion of a hunter approaching some unusual, never-before-seen animal in his snare. "I have wondered," Kan continued, "if it is true, what some of the Clan Elders, the older, suspicious ones, have said about you."

Leonardo was not aware that these distant, shadowy Foot Clan Elders said anything about him.

"They say that the tormented spirit of Hamato Yoshi could not rest. That it returned to this world as a demon rat, taking the form of those creatures he was so fond of in life. And that he brought back with him four fiends of the underworld, to be the bane of the Clan that had betrayed him."

Leonardo managed to catch himself before he could burst out laughing at the absurdity. Mocking the Clan Elders in front of Kan would be unwise.

Kan smiled a thin smile. "As I said, some of the Elders are old and suspicious. Rites were even performed, offerings and amends made to Yoshi's spirit, yet here you stand. And I can see that you are no demon, but a creature of flesh, that can bleed and suffer as the rest of us do."

Too true , Leo thought. It had never occurred to him that the Foot would have their own, mystical, explanation for his existence- one no less plausible, really, than mutagenic chemicals- though he wasn't sure whether he was disturbed or flattered to be deemed a beast of hell.

Thoughtfully, half to himself, Kan said, "You fight in the Hamato style. You show courage and loyalty to your clan. How very strange that Yoshi lives on in this way, spirit or not."

Leonardo found his voice behind a small, ironic smile. "You might try to put an end to that."

"If it will safeguard and rebuild the Foot Clan, as I have sworn to do before I return to Japan."

"You plan to return?"

"When it is time for another to assume leadership, as Karai did from Saki, and I did from her."

At the mention of Karai, the memory of that night in the courtyard, her blood spreading so slowly, the audience so still and silent, he, so powerless and transfixed, came back into vivid recall and Leonardo felt something inside himself shift, painfully. The words came out before he could stop them. "How can you say that so smugly, when you forced Karai to commit seppuku rather than allow her to return to Japan?"

The hard lines around Kan's mouth deepened at the sudden accusation. "It was entirely her choice, to set an honorable example rather than return in dishonor. I would have done no differently." He regarded Leonardo with a kind of pity, as though he'd seen the great beast and found it wanting. Straightening to his full height and leaning in, Kan towered several inches over Leonardo, clearly seeing him no longer as the embodiment of a supernatural curse, but merely a lone enemy prisoner. "Karai understood that the Clan is far greater than the life of any one person, be it Oruku Saki, or her, or myself. Common people may find our methods disreputable, but the Foot Clan has endured for hundreds of years. *Your* clan is small, a peculiar blip, and it will be soon be gone- within a few days, or within a generation- does it matter which?"

He turned and left the room with long, swift strides. The guards jumped to attention, pretending not to have been eavesdropping, and hurried to slide the door closed behind him.

Softly, Leonardo said to the empty room, "It matters to me."

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Normally, this would be a luxury. An entire night stretching out ahead of him, quiet hours alone with his thoughts, his computer, and his projects, uninterrupted by rambunctious siblings horsing around, arguing, or demanding to know when this or that thing around the lair would be fixed.

Donatello had never felt so bored and useless.

Raph and Mike had left an hour ago to scour the streets, as they had for the last five nights, for anything that would lead them to Saito Doshida. For the past five mornings, they had returned near sunrise, gloomy and exhausted, collapsing into a few hours of sleep as soon as they'd set foot in the door. Raphael was running them into the ground. Last night, Mike had offered to switch places with Don, to give him a break from the tedium of monitoring the Chambers residence, but also, no doubt, to give himself a much-needed reprieve. But Don had seen how his brother's eyes had glazed over just looking at the security system monitoring interface and had decided it was best that they not change spots after all.

I should be out there with them, Don thought. Doing something, anything, that might help them free Leo, instead of slouching here in the dark in front of his computer and making routine patrols around the block, feeling like some cross between an unappreciated night watchman and a stalker. Even knowing that it was what Leo would want him to be doing didn't make it much easier.

He had hope though. Ever since April had disseminated the story to the press, there had been a steady stream of journalists and policemen arriving to speak to Holly Chambers. April told him that someone from Witness Protection had been over earlier today, and Evan Chambers had been reached at some spiritual retreat on an

island in the Galapagos and was on a plane back to New York. Maybe Holly was safe now.

Even though it was only mid-evening, he felt drowsy and put his head down on his arms. His sleep routine was even more messed up than usual, and being inside this cave with the lights off and blinds drawn did not help.

His computer pinged at him. He glanced up at it blearily and then blinked himself to attention. Someone had set off a sensor coming up the rear walkway behind the Chambers residence. Donatello frowned; the narrow path ran behind the luxury townhomes on one side and a row of condo buildings on the other. It could be any of the other residents cutting through the back way. However, if the next sensor went off, it meant that someone had just stepped off the path and into the garden terrace behind the Chambers home.

It went off.

Donatello grabbed his trench coat and bo. By now, he knew every feature of this square block off by heart. He ran a shortcut over a fence, across a small lawn, and along the top of a stone wall to get to the Chambers property in less time than it would take the intruder to traverse the terrace to the house. But before he'd even reached the building, he pulled to an abrupt stop, ducking quickly into the stairwell of a basement apartment. Holly Chambers, in her telltale white coat, had just come down the steps of the front entrance. She slung her purse over her shoulder, glancing up and down the street anxiously, but excitedly, as if she'd been going stir crazy for days and it was about time she got out.

Of all the times to pick, Don thought. Holly walked down the street and passed right in front of him. He saw the smattering of light freckles on her cheek as a gust of wind blew back her rusty red hair. He caught a whiff of lavender scented shampoo. She was close enough that he could have reached out and touched her. Then she continued down the sidewalk.

For a second, Donatello deliberated. Had the person who'd approached the house seen or heard Holly leave? Would they try to get in and lay in wait, or would they follow her? He could swing around to the rear of the building and try to catch the intruder now.

No, it was too risky to let her out of his sight, not when he didn't know where the possible danger was. Donatello hugged the shadows and tailed the young woman at a distance that he judged would escape her detection, but that was shorter than he'd usually consider wise, close enough that he could span the gap in seconds. They didn't walk far; Holly took the steps down into the nearest subway station.

Not good. Subway stations were full of people in close quarters, and besides, how could he follow her onto the train? He hesitated, then went down the steps after her.

He caught sight of her on the platform. As swiftly as he could without drawing any attention, he edged up against the wall behind a pair of bongo drum-playing buskers, surreptitiously taking in the details of his surroundings while others rushed past without seeing him, noticing only, if they glanced in his direction at all, the large hands of the buskers rhythmically beating away at their instruments, just another ordinary part of the background.

There was a distant rumbling, the sound of the next train pulling into the station. Waiting passengers craned their necks to look down the gaping black tunnels on either side, trying to see from which direction the train was arriving, and whether it was theirs. Donatello saw Holly take an expectant step towards the edge of the platform. Then he noticed a person weaving through the crowd, moving swiftly and determinedly towards her.

In a flash, he saw, in his mind, the four-hundred-ton train roar into the station at fifty-five miles per hour, its vortex of wind whipping the hair of all those people turned towards it, and then, the one easy, well-timed, fatal shove that Holly would never see coming.

He couldn't reach them in time, and even if he could, he couldn't fight in a crowded public place like this. Donatello vaulted over the turnstile and leapt for the fire alarm box. He drove his fist into the glass cover, shattering it, and pulled the lever down.

Immediately, a shrill, piercing siren wail blasted through the station. People stopped in their tracks, putting their hands to their ears, turning in circles. Faces of all different colors and ages wore similar conflicted expressions, uncertain whether to be merely annoyed at the false alarm disrupting their travel plans, or frightened by imminent danger.

One person did not hesitate. Donatello felt a tug of recognition as the figure that had been making its way towards Holly turned, caught sight of him, and ran for the stairs.

It was infectious. Seeing one person run, several others began shoving their way towards the exit turnstiles in panic. The arriving train screeched into the station, drowned out by the continued siren blasts. Don caught a quick glimpse of Holly, still standing at the platform, her face white with fear and confusion.

Then he ran, plowing through the crowd, jumping back over the turnstile, hearing gasps and screams following the unavoidable glimpses that some people caught of him, his trench coat billowing out as he sprinted after the fleeing figure. He caught sight of the person at the top of the subway steps and took the stairs two and three at a time in pursuit. Emerging on the street, he saw the nimble shape - grey windbreaker, black jeans, black knit hat - disappearing down the street, and took off after it.

His quarry was fast, dodging pedestrians, cars, trees, and food carts, turning sharp corners, judging astutely that Donatello would be faster over open ground and thus trying to lose him at intersections and through alleys. For four blocks he was like a shark after a minnow, gaining, then losing, then gaining ground, as his slippery prey ran behind delivery trucks, weaved around dumpsters, and dashed finally, into an open air flea market that ran the length of a crowded,

narrow street, wisely diving into the one place Donatello could not follow: a crowd of people.

But there was no competing with a mutant ninja turtle for ability to navigate urban terrain. There were only two ways out of the channel of tarp tents and tables of cheap knick-knacks, and both of them were visible from the second-story apartments lining either side. A dumpster and a U-haul truck were stepping stones to the row of concrete balconies. There, shielded from street view by the river of tent roofs, he pinpointed his target backtracking through the crowd, obviously counting on Don circling the block and lying in wait futilely at the other end of the flea market.

He crouched motionless on the edge of the corner balcony, until she passed the last tent, scooted around the corner of the building, and, scanning carefully in all directions except directly above, started walking, losing the safety of the crowd. Donatello dropped to earth behind her like a jaguar from a tree.

Ninja that she was, the muffled impact of his landing, the rustle of wind that accompanied it, or the shift in light from his shadow alerted her, but too late. She whirled, going for her knife, but Donatello, not bothering to draw his own weapon, was already upon her, dashing the blade out her grip with a surgically precise wrist strike, and snapping the hard ridge of his hand into her temple. Tami crumpled, her dislodged hat sliding comically off her head, electric blue hair almost purple in the dark.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

When they nabbed Joey Carbone, he had just stepped out to toss the garbage into the dumpster behind his restaurant. Raphael clamped a hand around his mouth and dragged him twenty feet, pushing him against the wall at the dark end of the alley. Joey thrashed about and made all sorts of inarticulate noises until Raphael growled, "Relax, I'm not gonna kill ya. Just don't make a scene and piss me off." He took his hand off and the man cowered against the brick at the sight of the two inhuman figures silhouetted by the steam and yellow light pouring from the open kitchen doorway behind them.

"Fuck, you're real," he whined.

"So you know about us," Mike said.

"Sure, I hear stories." The man wiped his sweaty, doughy face with the back of one of his sweaty, doughy hands, blinking furiously as though the two apparitions would disappear if he did so hard enough. "What do you want from me?"

"What have you heard about the Rising Hand?" Raphael asked. Joey's restaurant was a well-known gathering place and business meeting spot for New York mafia men.

"That yakuza-type outfit? Not much, they don't bother us..."

Raph jerked his head back towards the restaurant. "Any of the capos in there ever mention them? Ever hear the name Saito Doshida?"

"The only thing I heard one of 'em say the other week is that whole districts are up for grabs now, 'cause the Jap gangs are at war." He shot furtive looks at the safety of the doorway just out of reach. "That's all, honest. I got no reason to lie to ya."

They let Joey scurry back to the din of his kitchen, and had slipped out of sight by the time the man cast a terrified look behind his shoulder. Leaving behind the small strip of eateries, tattoo parlors, and record shops, they crossed the bleak, yawning landscape of warehouses, truck yards and freight depots. After a while, Mike asked, "Where are we going?"

Raphael didn't answer because he didn't know.

They had turned Hell's Kitchen upside down, checking every office, warehouse, and hideout they could find. They had been back to Agete headquarters and broken into it to find that, while a work crew had begun to clean up and repair the damage, the place was unoccupied, Doshida's computer and all his files gone from his office. They'd even been back to Doshida's old base of operations, where Don, Mike and Leo had found him a year ago. They were shaking down every organized crime outfit they could lay their hands on- and Raphael could lay his hands on quite a few- hoping some gangster who had no fondness for the Rising Hand might have some information to cough up. So far, they'd come up empty.

It was around one o'clock in the morning, Raph guessed. The night was only half over, and leaden fatigue was already setting in. He refused to give in to it, but it was getting harder to ignore. And he was more accustomed to long nights of traveling, scouting and fighting than Michelangelo. Mike, who protested dramatically to anything from extra push-ups to being made to cross the room for the TV remote, hadn't uttered a word of complaint, but it didn't take a genius to see he was exhausted.

When they reached the greenway along the river, Raphael sat down on a concrete barricade. Here, like in the engine room of a massive ship, there were no sounds from the oblivious passengers riding the great machine. The familiar din of people in the streets, the honking of taxis and the hubbub of countless bars, nightclubs, restaurants and theatres was replaced by the ceaseless roar of the freeway, the rumble of trucks coming and going, the *chuf-chuf-chuf* of distant helicopter blades. Mike sat down next to him and together they

stared out at the grey-blue waters of the Hudson, the docks that led down to it, and the lights of the nearby heliport. It began to rain- slow, fat, heavy drops that splattered on impact.

Six days had passed. They were getting nowhere. He would succeed only in wearing them down until they could barely walk, much less fight. Despair rose inside him, like a stream glutted with rainwater overflowing its hard banks. He sagged forward, head bowed, elbows on knees, closing his hands together palm over fist to prevent them from trembling with emotion.

Mike put a knowing hand on his shell. Rain slid off both their faces. "Maybe we should head back early tonight," he said.

He almost shrugged off the hand and stood up. He almost declared, "We're not going back. We've got five more hours." If it had been anyone else, he would have. Instead, slowly, he nodded.

They stood and began to walk in silence, cutting unhurriedly through the parking lot of the heliport, aiming for the truck yard on the other side. Hitching a ride on top of an eastbound truck, if there happened to be one leaving now, would cut their travel time in half. Raphael was half-heartedly scanning the small parking area, judging the stealthiest way across it and over the chain link fence, when he jerked his head back and shot his arm out to hold up his brother.

The black SUV was parked by the helipad, engine off, taillights glowing.

Fatigue and defeat evaporated, replaced instantly by taut excitement. "That car. That's the one Leo and I saw."

"Are you sure?"

"I got close enough to see the license plate. I'm sure." He didn't say anything more, but dropped low and ran towards the vehicle, approaching it diagonally from the rear right side, seeing and using

the available cover, knowing that Mike was mirroring his approach from the left, like two lions closing in on a wildebeest.

When they were near enough, they could see that the passenger side was empty, but the driver was slightly reclined in his seat, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel in time to some song playing on his car stereo. Raph caught his brother's eye and nodded a quick signal. They moved at the same time.

Raphael crashed into the right side of the SUV, the hilt of his sai exploding through the passenger side window. The driver fell against his door in a panic, fumbling it open and falling out onto the damp asphalt. Michelangelo scooped him into the air by the front of his jacket. A sharp jab to the solar plexus put a stop to his flailing punches, doubling him over before Mike pushed him up against the rain-slicked side of the car.

"Where's you boss?" Mike demanded. "Doshida. Where has he gone?"

Pinched features scrunched up, wet hair plastered to his forehead, the man shook his head wildly, his short black ponytail waggling. "I- I don't- I don't know-"

"You *better* know!" Raphael roared, smashing the side of his fist into the car less than a inch from the man's ear, causing him to jerk in terror.

"He- he left town- on other business-"

"Bullshit," Raph growled, though the words struck a line of dread through him.

"Where then?" Mike pressed, giving the man a good shake. "If you-"

In the hours and days that followed, Raphael would curse himself many times over for concentrating all his enraged attention on the driver and not giving a second thought to the empty passenger seat.

As it was, only adrenalin-enhanced ninja reflexes saved them. It seemed as though the motion he glimpsed from the corner of his eye, the sound of the cocking firearm, and the flicker of the driver's eyes all happened in one moment. Throwing himself hard against Mike, hitting the ground, and seeing the bullets rip into the driver and into the side of the SUV all happened in the next. The gunman stopped firing, screaming a horrified denial as he saw his companion's body slide to the ground, and in that one pause, Michelangelo, who'd fallen against the open car door, flung a thin-bladed throwing knife with spectacular accuracy, straight through the shooter's gun hand.

The weapon clattered to the ground as the gunman grasped his wrist, staring at his skewered hand in horror. In a couple of bounds, Raphael closed half the gap between them before his target took off running. As he reached the end of the parking lot, the man looked over his shoulder and saw Raphael, like a scent-maddened hound on a fox, flying at him through the rain-fractured orange lamplight like something out of a nightmare. Putting on a desperate burst of speed, he raced across the road.

In the heavy rain, the speeding car with one broken headlight didn't fishtail to a screeching halt until five hundred feet past the spot where the man bounced off its hood. Raphael jolted to a abrupt halt, his feet sending up a splash from the puddle he landed in. Letting loose a howl of astonished rage, he clenched his hands into helpless fists at the sight of his only lead to the Rising Hand, now limp as a human beanbag on the road. Headlights began pulling to a stop, car doors slammed, there were screams.

He ran back to the SUV. It came into his sight like a surreal apocalyptic vision, red taillights still on, windshield wipers sweeping on intermittent mode, the faint vocals of a jazz song emanating from its interior, the dead driver sitting slumped against the bullet-pocked left side. Michelangelo emerged from under the open door of the trunk. "What happened?" he asked.

"He's dead."

Mike looked at him in shock. "You can't have killed him! He was our only-"

"I know that, I'm not stupid! He ran across the road. A car hit him." So furious he could barely string two swearwords together, Raph kicked the side of the SUV, again and again, so hard the rear door dented inwards. When he finally paused, Mike said, "You should take a look at this."

The back of the SUV, its rear seats folded down, was loaded with silver metal crates. There were two larger ones, each about the size of a child's toy chest, and many more smaller ones stacked together like shoe boxes. Mike had broken open the lock on one of the larger ones and he lifted the lid.

"Holy shit," Raph exclaimed. The crate was filled with weapons: handguns and semi-automatic rifles as well as ninja daggers, bladed staffs and chain whips, and even a couple strange weapons that looked like some ingenious combination of sniper rifle and ninja dart blowgun. Raph picked up a blade, examined it, and slipped it in his belt. He was considering how many weapons he could reasonably carry when Mike pointed to one of the smaller boxes.

"It gets better," he said.

The small box had a foam tray inside it. Cushioned in the tray were ten capped syringes filled with slightly bluish liquid. Raph looked from the box in his hand to the roughly two dozen more piled together. If he had been stunned by the larger crate, he was now rendered speechless.

"I'll bet those are what I think they are," Mike whispered. "They were going to put all of it on a helicopter. To where?"

Police and ambulance sirens tore through the air, very nearby and getting nearer. Raphael slammed the lid back down on the box he was holding and tucked it under his arm while Mike grabbed a few lighter-weight weapons from the large crate. They plunged through

the rain to the perimeter chain link fence, scaling it less deftly than usual owing to their burdens, letting themselves down one-handed on the other side just as the strobe of red and blue lights swept across the strange scene they had abandoned.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

Donatello met them at the door. "I was wondering if you'd be back early," he said, glancing out at the lessening but still steady rain and the glow of a sunless dawn. He did a double take at their newly acquired weapons and the box Raphael was carrying. "What are *those?"*

"You'll never believe it," Mike said, setting down a chain whip, two daggers and case of smoke bombs before drying himself off with one of their sleeping blankets.

"Well, there's something else you'll never believe," Don said. He pushed open the door to the apartment's single bedroom.

The blanket fell from Mike's hands. *"Tami?"*

The Rising Hand ninja was sitting in Don's only chair, her hands and feet tied around it securely, her blue hair spiky and disheveled. At the sound of Mike's voice, she raised her head, her face set in a mask of defiance at the sight of the three turtles.

"I caught her," Don explained, "trying to get to Holly."

Raphael crossed the small room in two strides. His hand shot out and clamped like a vise under the woman's chin, forcing her face up and nearly tilting the chair backwards. "Where is he?" His voice was a low, deep threat. *"Where?"*

"Raph!" Mike grabbed his brother by the elbow. "C'mon, take it easy!" He saw Tami stiffening under the tightening grip, her eyes bulging with pain, fearful but resolute. With real heat, he shoved Raphael back with both hands. *"Let go!"*

Raphael looked as though he would deck his brother across the face. Donatello caught hold of him by the rim of the shell before he could do so, and Mike stepped between him and Tami, spreading both hands in conciliation, checking the anger in his own voice, bringing it down, way down, to bear-soothing level. "Let's go to the other room and talk, okay? Let's just talk first."

Though his furious glower stayed in place, Raphael turned and stalked into the main room. Mike followed him and Don shut the door to the bedroom, cutting Tami from sight. Raph wheeled on Mike and pointed a rigid finger at the closed door. "She knows. If anyone knows where he is, she does."

Mike said, "Let me try talking to her."

Raph put his face close to his brother's and his voice dropped. "I swear Mike, I don't care how soft you are for her, if I have to, I will break every bone in her body..."

"Just let me talk to her." He put his hands on Raphael's upper arms. "This night has been... crazy. Go take a hot shower. It won't hurt, to give me an hour, will it?"

Raphael considered it, then turned away with a grunt. "Have it your way."

Mike let out a breath. He felt Don's even gaze on him and asked, "Is Holly okay?"

"She's fine. I saw her make it back to her dad's place from the subway station where I left her, after all the cops and firemen were gone." At Mike's nonplussed expression, he added, "I'll explain later."

Mike nodded distractedly, then went into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Tami, her jaw line reddened by Raphael's fingers, seemed intent on studying the carpet and did not look up.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry 'bout that." He looked around the unfurnished room and palmed his forehead. "Again, a chair. What I wouldn't give for another chair around here. Even a beanbag or a cushion or something." He sat down on the floor near Tami, his shell against the wall. "Are you okay?" he asked gently. When she didn't answer, he said, "Your wrists look kind of raw. You really shouldn't try to work free of that rope. Don does the best knots in the family." A long pause. "Okay, I know how ridiculously ironic this is going to sound, but I'm...glad to see you. I mean, not like this, tied up and all. I'm just glad to see that you're alive, that the Foot didn't get to you."

After a moment, she gave a very small nod. "Me too," she said quietly.

He wasn't sure if she meant 'me too' as in she was also glad to see him, or 'me too' as in she was also glad she was still alive. He let it go and asked, "What happened, Tami? Why are you here?"

Without looking at him, she said, "I had to finish the assignment."

The depth of sadness in his voice surprised even him. "He sent you, to kill an innocent woman?"

"I asked to go. That woman is a threat to Agete, to everything that we've built."

"I know about the drugs that Doshida has been selling to Alliant, and about the deaths." He grimaced. "To kill people with that stuff, and then kill more to keep it all secret..."

"Those overdose deaths were isolated incidents," she retorted, jerking her head up with a defensive glare, apparently abandoning her previous resolve not to make eye contact. "Saito is improving the formula and dosing protocol to reduce the side effects. There will be far fewer fatal reactions with the next version." She sped on, impassioned. "It's going to be a big business, almost as big as covert ops. All we needed was a little more time. We can't let some little blabbermouth medical intern ruin it all."

Michelangelo shook his head, appalled. He got up and left the room. Several minutes later, he returned and dropped a folded newspaper into Tami's lap. "That's the early morning edition of tomorrow's *New York Times* ."

Tami read the headline of the article he'd laid open. *Drug Deaths At Military Contract Firm Raise Suspicions.*

"It's already out and gaining speed," he said. "In a few days, they'll be asking what the drugs do and where they came from."

Tami's bottom lip quivered. She bit down on it, still staring at the paper. "You did this." Her accusation was a statement.

"Me? Nah, I'm not *that* bright. It was mostly my brother, and we had help." He took the paper off her lap and knelt down to look up at her face. "It's over, Tami. It's no use trying to cover it up any more. Maybe it's time you got out of this, don't you think?"

She chuckled humorlessly. "Then you should let me go."

"I'd like to. Tell me where Doshida is."

She studied his earnest expression. "Either you plan to kill him, or hand him over to the Foot as a peace offering. Which is it?" When Michelangelo's face betrayed pain, she nodded in understanding. "They got to you somehow, didn't they? Is that why that other one isn't here?"

He spoke around a stone in his throat. "His name's Leonardo."

"I'll never tell you where Saito is. *Never* ." She bit the word off, turning her face away from him. "You can send in your crazy brother to torture me now."

"He's not going to torture you. I'm sure he wants to, but he won't." Mike turned her face back to him gently but firmly. "But he won't give up either. He'll hunt Saito down sooner or later, even if it means

taking out every member of the Rising Hand along the way. He would burn down a city to get our brother back." In a quieter voice, he added, "So would I."

"You'll have to kill me sooner or later then."

"Tami," Mike pleaded. "I don't want to see you get hurt, I really don't. After what happened with Snake, and what I saw happen to Ren..." He put his hands on her shoulders, the small bones rigid under his hands. "You trusted me once, didn't you? Would you believe it if I told you I'm not just trying to use you to get to Doshida? When he falls to us, or the Foot, or the law, you don't have to go down with him. You have your own life to think of, don't you?"

"You actually think my own life matters to me?" Though she tried to stop them by blinking fiercely, tears beaded in the corners of her eyes. One of them rolled slowly down her left cheek. With a sniff of anger and shame, she wiped it off her chin onto her shoulder.

The realization dawned slowly but with certainty. He let go of her shoulders and sat back. "You love him."

When she didn't answer, Mike bowed his head in comprehension and defeat. "Is he worth it?"

She closed her eyes. "He's the future."

Michelangelo stood up and left the room without speaking.

The apartment was muted and gray, rain still spitting at the windows, dusky morning sunlight barely providing enough illumination for it to be considered daytime. Michelangelo realized suddenly how tired he was, not just physically, but emotionally. Wrung out, like a towel, heavy and saturated, being twisted painfully dry, then filled and twisted yet again.

Don was back at his computer, and Raph, a blanket draped over his shoulders for warmth, was fruitlessly opening and closing the compartments of the bare fridge in search of anything besides cherry-flavored power bars, graham crackers, or beef jerky. Both of them looked up expectantly as soon they saw him.

He shook his head. "She won't say."

"Like hell she won't." Raphael closed the fridge and started for the bedroom door.

Mike moved into his brother's path. "Please, don't go in there, Raph. You won't get it out of her. Just...let it go."

"Let it go? Let it *go?"* Raphael repeated the words as though they were in a foreign language. He stepped back, his face hardening into something despairing and cruel. "Let me *talk* to her, you say. Oh, I get it now. You're just so hard up for a pretty human girl to throw you a bone that you would choose *her* over the life of your own brother!"

"Raph." It was shocking to hear that tone come out of Donatello's mouth.

Mike shook his head vehemently. "No, it's not like that at all, I would never-" He felt his face burning. "How can you even- *think* that-" Words failed him.

Donatello grabbed Raphael by the arm and turned him around. "That's going too far, and you know it. You think you're the only one who's desperate to get Leo out of that compound?"

"Maybe I'm the only one who'll do what it takes," Raph shot back, but Donatello's very rare, blisteringly icy reproach had put a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Michelangelo pulled himself back together, feeling like a man madly collecting spilled marbles. "She loves him," he said. "I'm sure of it. She'd rather die than give him up."

"Easy enough to test *that* theory," Raphael said.

"What do you think you're going to do? What would someone have to do to one of us in her place? You're not a monster. You're just *not* . And I- I won't let you become one." His voice struggled against his constricting throat. "Leo would never forgive us."

Something in Raphael's face slowly crumpled under the unassailable conviction of Michelangelo's words. He tore away from both his brothers with a cry of frustration, pacing a slow, anguished circle around the room, his hands clasped tightly over his bowed head, as though he could hold himself together in the space between his elbows. Had they been underground, or had it been nighttime, he surely would have bolted from the room.

Gently, Donatello said, "We're all fried. We should get some sleep."

A small nod; an act of enormous willpower. Raphael raised his eyes to Mike's face, then turned away. "About what I said..."

"It hurt," Mike replied. "Worse than anything you've ever said to me. But it's forgotten."

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

The rain stopped by mid-afternoon but the skies remained cloudy and threatening, lending an appropriate sense of limbo to the day. Night and day locked in stalemate, blurring together, neither leading, merely circling each other round and round.

Raphael rose, gulped a plastic cupful of water and leaned against the kitchen counter, closing his eyes for minute, balanced maddeningly between his need to sleep more and his inability to do so. Donatello slept huddled under a blanket in the corner, the curve of his shell rising and falling steadily. Raph looked around the rest of the room in annoyance. The novelty of being in a real aboveground apartment had worn off days ago, and he missed his own bedroom, the stocked fridge, the ability to come and go at will through the tunnels, and Splinter.

He refilled his cup and stalked towards the bedroom, stepping over Michelangelo's lightly snoring form. "Some guard," Raph snorted under his breath.

The woman's chin was slumped down to her chest, half-dozing, but she jolted up when she saw Raphael enter the room. He stood studying her for a minute; he hadn't really seen her last night- just a glimpse through a red haze of rage- but the few hours of sleep he'd gotten had siphoned the heat out of his system and he was able to notice now that she had a nice shape to her shoulders and arms, a heart-shaped face that was pretty in an unconventional way, and long-lashed eyes that regarded him expectantly and with steely resolve, growing wide when he drew his dagger.

He knelt and cut the ropes that bound her feet, then undid the ropes tying her arms behind the chair. Stiffly, painfully, she moved her arms, rubbing her sore wrists. He handed her the cup of water and

she drank it all. She looked towards the bathroom and he let her stumble towards it, her legs wobbly from hours of immobility. When she returned, he tossed his blanket in the corner of the room, along with the half-eaten bag of beef jerky and a power bar. He shrugged. "All we got," he explained.

She nodded, and he waited. For a minute, he watched her eat, then he averted his gaze, looking instead at Mike's slumbering form just outside the doorway. He didn't want to think about how that pretty little blue head held locked inside it the location of the man he so urgently needed to find.

When she was done, he held up the rope and, resignedly, she put her hands out. He bound her wrists together snugly, then her ankles. He motioned with his head towards the blanket in the corner and she curled herself into it, overwhelmed, exhausted, and soon, asleep.

The sky was clearing and daylight fading as he climbed to the roof of the apartment building. It would be a clear night. The city felt fresh, cleansed. By this time, he and Mike were usually setting out into the streets on what now felt like a futile hunt.

He sat on the edge of the roof and looked across the block. The home of Evan Chambers emanated warm, orange light. Through the massive rear bay window that spanned the upper two stories of the townhome, he could see a large wrought iron chandelier hanging over a spiral wooden staircase, and the tiny figure of Holly Chambers coming down the steps with a man, presumably her father. Perhaps they were going to speak with one of the journalists parked out on their curb. Raphael squinted but could not see much more from this distance. The man had saved Raph's life last year and now, they had saved his daughter's, and this was as close as he would ever get to them.

After tonight, there would be three more days before he had to return to the Foot compound to face Kan Masataro and his troops. He hadn't given up all hope yet, but he had to face the probability that he would be empty handed. Leo's final edict notwithstanding, the fact

that he *would* return was not in question. This clan, his family, needed Leonardo, needed him most of all. There it was: a truth he'd jealously resented, hated even, but had always known, proven out well enough, he thought with shame, by his missteps over the last several days.

He opened the small metal box that he'd brought up with him and ran his finger down the row of nestled syringes. He wondered, in idle curiosity, how much money Doshida made off of each of these boxes. To think that he'd once brought food and cash to the hounded Foot fugitive would have made him laugh had it not been so painfully ironic. He freed one of the syringes from the box and held it up to the ambient streetlight, turning it this way and that. No instructions; no doubt they were provided separately.

"Don't do it." Donatello stood over him, looking from him to the open box and back again. "Please."

Raphael closed his hand around the syringe. "We don't need Doshida after all. We've seen what this stuff can do. I can get Leo out."

"Even that won't get you through a whole compound of Foot ninjas."

"It would be enough. I'd do enough damage that Leo would find a way through."

"And what, exactly, were you expecting me and Mike to do?"

"Find him, and cover his escape."

Donatello gave a pained laugh, running a hand down the side of his face in disbelief. "You *are* an idiot sometimes."

Raphael frowned at his brother, too emotionally worn out to get really angry. "I don't see what's so damned funny."

"Nothing. Nothing's funny." Donatello sat down next to him. "You have no idea what the dosing quantity and frequency is supposed to be. You don't know how it would affect a mutant. And if you'd seen the medical reports on the deaths that Mike and I discovered, you would know that there's a good chance it would kill you."

"It might not," Raph said, "It doesn't kill everyone."

"It might not," Don repeated. He leaned back on his arms, looking out across the expanse of rooftops and streetlights. They sat in silence for several minutes before Don, still gazing out at the city, said, "Do you know what we were doing this time last year?" Without waiting for a reply, "You were comatose; we thought you were done for. We had no antidote to Blackroot poison, and the Foot had just nabbed Doshida." Tension had crept into his frame just from the memory. "You should have seen Leo completely lose it when we found that office trashed."

Despite himself, and perhaps a little smugly, the corners of Raph's mouth turned up. "He really did lose his shit, did he?"

"Screaming, cussing, throwing his katana across the room... yeah, I'd say some shit was lost." Don smiled, able to do so now. At the time, it had been anything but humorous. He became serious again. "That night, Mike took April home. She'd been with you all day. Leo was a wreck; I left him like a zombie in the hall. I came here." He pointed at the Chambers residence. "I went in through that side window over there, I went up those stairs, into that bedroom at the top." His finger traced his path in air. "I was thinking: this is either the most brilliant or the most patently stupid thing I've ever done in my whole life. And that includes the time I tried to outfit Mike's skateboard with a nitroglycerin rocket."

An inadvertent grin broke out on Raph's face. Don smiled crookedly, then took the syringe from Raph's fingers. "You owe me, brother," he said. "You owe it to all of us, not to get killed." He returned the syringe to the metal box and closed it firmly. "We'll find another way."

The smell of something hot and appetizing wafted up to them as they climbed back down to street level. Raphael's stomach clenched in painful longing. When was the last time he'd had an actual meal?

"April and Mike are fixing up some real food," Don said.

"April's here?"

"She just arrived. I came up to the roof to tell you." He set his mouth into a straight line, tucking the metal box under his arm a little more securely.

April had brought over two rotisserie chickens from a grocery store deli, a large tub of potato salad and a salad mix kit, which Michelangelo was assembling in its black plastic bowl with great flourish, as though he were a contestant on a Food Network reality show, making something out of shaved radicchio, prosciutto, and chervil instead of iceberg lettuce and a plastic baggie of cherry tomatoes and sliced cucumber.

"What have you guys been living on?" April exclaimed, shaking her head at the counter of wrappers and cracker crumbs. "I should have come over earlier, but like we hoped, this story just started snowballing. Raph!"

April threw her arms around Raphael in a tight hug. He lifted her off her feet, burying his face in her shoulder. Some of his strain melted; where there was April, there was sunshine. He realized he hadn't seen her for over a week; every moment he'd been awake, he'd been out searching the city. When he set her down, she pulled back and looked at him with concern. "How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Better now that you're here." He smiled nonchalantly, but his eyes were incapable of deception and the concern on her face only deepened.

"Let's eat," she said.

Raph reached past Michelangelo for the disposable tableware in April's grocery bag. Mike had already taken out one of the plates, heaped some food on it and set it aside on the kitchen counter. "She's still sleeping - it's for when she wakes up," he explained. He left it at that, but he put a hand briefly on Raphael's arm in passing, too tactful to mention in words that he'd noticed what his brother had done earlier, recognizing it for what it was: his rough attempt to make amends.

The small folding table could not accommodate all of them, so they pushed it aside, laid a blanket out on the floor and sat around it. "Like a picnic," Mike declared.

There was a knock at the door. Everyone stopped in mid-motion. Raphael's first, ridiculous thought was: *I'm not leaving this food.* If it was the absentee landlord, he was just going to have to knock him unconscious and squirrel him away in the closet with the For Rent sign until he'd had a chance to eat this chicken drumstick.

"Guys? April? You in there?" Casey's voice.

Exhalations of relief. April jumped up to open the door and let him in. Casey gave her a squeeze around the waist at the doorway. "Can't stay, babe," he said, "Got an evening shift tonight. But I brought over a guest." He stepped aside. The turtles looked up and fell silent. Mike dropped his plastic spoon. "Master Splinter," he exclaimed.

"I'll be going then," Casey said, shooting a sympathetic glance in Raphael's direction.

"Many thanks, Casey." Splinter closed the door behind him and pushed back the hood of his cloak. With an air of unhurried curiosity, he took in the small, dim apartment before looking over the flabbergasted faces of his three sons. His grey whiskers lifted and spread in what the turtles recognized as bemusement.

"Ah, I am told this is what happens. Children grow up, move away and forget to invite their father over for dinner."

The turtles hastened to stand and bow in belated greeting. "Forgive us, sensei," Don said. "I know, we haven't been back, we've barely called..."

"There is nothing to forgive, Donatello," Splinter said. "You have had important and dangerous matters to preoccupy you. Thankfully, April has kept me well informed as to your investigative progress, and Casey has been kind enough to introduce me to a great deal of sports television. However, I decided that tonight I must see my sons."

On any previous night, Raph thought, he would not have found them all together. Splinter could be uncannily psychic like that sometimes.

"Raphael," Splinter picked him out, hanging back slightly behind Mike. "I had hoped that you would reconsider your message, and come back to speak with me."

With difficulty, he met his father's gaze. "Sorry, sensei."

Splinter said sadly, "Did you believe I would blame you?"

Raphael was unsure how to answer, so he did not. Splinter lowered his head for a moment, then raised it and said in a more cheerful voice, "I see you were about to eat. Let us do so. There will be time to talk afterwards."

It did not take long for three famished young turtle-men to devour every last scrap of food. Mike even ran his finger along the inside of the plastic container to spoon out the remnants of the potato salad, a move that Splinter would have frowned upon at home, but that he was willing to overlook at a 'picnic.' The mood was as good as could be expected under the circumstances, those being of course, Leonardo's gaping absence, Raphael's moroseness, and the fact that they had a captive enemy ninja tied up in the other room.

As they tidied up, tossing all the disposables into the plastic grocery bag, April filled them in on the latest developments from the day

before. "So far, Alliant has refused to speak to the press but has suspended its bid for additional government contracts pending an 'internal investigation.' Some family members of the victims have stepped up to say that they suspected Alliant of condoning and even providing performance-enhancing drugs to its employees."

"Any evidence that makes the link to Agete and Doshida?" Don asked.

"Not yet, but given Holly's role in this, the police agreed to examine the death of Craig Stevenson, and another man, Jeremy Martin, who worked at the regional health authority and opened a formal review on the Alliant deaths at Craig's urging."

"It's hard to believe what a can of worms we opened," Mike said.

"You have done well," Splinter said to Don and Mike. "In protecting Ms. Chambers, you also exposed and weakened Doshida's criminal business. April, we are, as always, in your debt."

"Are you kidding me? This is been the biggest story I've broken in a while. I should thank you guys." April looked over at Donatello. "Speaking of Holly, her father arrived this morning. That's really helped her. She was shaken by what happened in the subway station."

"I can't blame her," Don said. He recounted the events of the previous evening, starting with his detection of an intruder behind the Chambers house, up to his capture of Tami, and ending with their inability to determine from her the whereabouts of Saito Doshida. He left out the emotionally raw details of their exchange last night. Raphael was silent. Michelangelo said, "Excuse me a minute," and took the plate of food from the counter into the closed bedroom.

"So that is the person whose scent I detected when I entered," Splinter said.

Donatello glanced in the direction Mike had gone. Dropping his voice to a hush that would not be overheard, he mused, "What do we do with her?"

"Would he come for her?" Raphael wondered, speaking up for nearly the first time since dinner began. "Doshida- would he come, if he knew we had her?"

Don thought about it. "I doubt it. For one thing, why would he come himself? He could just send over a few of his pharmacologically-enhanced fighters to retrieve her. Besides, I doubt he would place the fate of one person above preserving himself and his business."

Mike returned and Splinter addressed him as he sat back down. "Do you believe she is still a threat to Ms. Chambers?"

Mike rubbed his head, considering. "She knows that Holly's story is now public, so she doesn't have anything to gain from going after her again. I'm not saying she won't act out of spite, but...I don't think she will." They were all speaking in whispers now, the temporarily warm glow of dinner chased away by the strange tension of debating the fate of the person on the other side of the door.

"And she is immovably loyal to the Rising Hand and Saito Doshida?"

Mike nodded.

"We cannot hold her indefinitely, we have no way to prove to the authorities that she has committed any crime, and we cannot honorably execute her." He tugged the tuft of fur on his chin. "It seems we have no choice but to release her."

Raphael felt as though the earth was turning into quicksand beneath him. "She's the only card we have," he said slowly, trying very hard to keep his tone even. "If we let her go, she'll find a way to warn Doshida, and that'll be the end of any chance we had of getting that bastard."

They were silent; they all knew what was at stake. April was sitting very still, her mouth hidden behind clasped hands, as if she were afraid to breathe. Michelangelo, who had been staring at the ground, raised anguished eyes. "I was the one in the video that Doshida used to provoke the Foot. Maybe if I went to Kan instead..."

"No." The change in Splinter's tone, from calm and ruminating, to stern, iron-clad authority, made even April cringe. "I forbid any of you from acting alone in an attempt to free Leonardo. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sensei."

" *Hai* , sensei."

Splinter's bottomless black eyes pinned Raphael in place with the weight of an anvil. " *Hai* , sensei," he mumbled. The words tasted like chalk, fake and gritty. He felt a crawling heat rising up his neck into his head. First Mike, then Don, now Splinter... the *gall* of each of them in turn, forbidding him to act, to do something, *anything* .

"Maybe Leo will find a way out," Mike said hopefully, although they could tell that even he recognized how difficult that would be. "Doshida managed to escape that place."

"Once he drugged his guards, Doshida could throw on a mask and walk out looking like any Foot solider," Don pointed out. "Leo can't."

"Then we must negotiate for an extension of time," Splinter said. "And at the least, hold the Foot to an honorable resolution."

Honorable resolution. In ninja-speak, that meant a fair, feud-ending duel, if not seppuku. Presumably preferable to straight out defeat and execution. Raphael felt the crawling heat reach his eyeballs. "Why are we talking as though we're giving up?" he demanded.

"No one's giving up," Don replied. "But if we haven't been able to find Doshida yet, I'm not sure what else to do in the next three days,

unless you have an idea."

He didn't. Raphael ground his teeth; it was infuriating him, driving him to the brink of an all-consuming obsession, this inability to turn the tables on the leader of the Rising Hand, when, looking back, it was clear that the man had them figured out long ago. Just thinking about it made Raphael insane. For his own gain, Doshida had exploited their family loyalty, knowing that by making one of them vulnerable, the others could be contained or manipulated. It was his perpetual advantage, the predictability of their bond to each other, while as he cared only for...

"Money," Raphael said aloud.

Several pairs of eyes turned towards him. "What about it?" Don asked.

The jumble of his thoughts spun wildly, broke apart, coalesced. "You're the one who said it, Don. That Doshida wouldn't place the life of one person above himself or his business. *His business.* " Raphael leapt to his feet and paced furiously. "Damn it to hell, all this time I've been killing myself trying to hunt that weasel down. I should've been thinking of luring him out. Doshida's not the kind of ninja we're used to; he'll send his juiced-up cronies to fight for him. But he can't send 'em to meet clients and close deals - that's *his* specialty."

Donatello said, "He's on to something, sensei."

Splinter nodded. "Go on, Raphael."

"We need something that'll get his attention, something worth a lot of money, that his greedy little heart will care about."

"A meeting with a wealthy client, over some plump job," Mike mused in agreement. "How?"

April cleared her throat. They'd almost forgotten she was there, hearing so much more than they would usually discuss in front of her. "I have an idea."

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Getting past the security-badge activated, employee-only doors required picking out the right tailgate victim. After a few minutes of standing outside with Casey, pretending to be a couple of casually chatting co-workers, April spotted a promising target striding towards the lobby doors, talking into her cell phone, towing a wheeled suitcase behind her.

April fell into step behind the woman, whipping out her own phone and keeping her head down as though she were engrossed in checking messages on her way to some important meeting. She walked quickly through the marble-tiled foyer as though she did it many times a day, not looking around at the dark wood paneling and patriotic imagery that dominated the decor. Casey hustled after her, heavy bag slung over his shoulder. The lobby receptionists gave them a passing glance and returned to their conversation.

The woman with the suitcase swiped her access card, pulled the door open and kept plowing straight down the hallway. April grabbed the handle just before the door shut and she and Casey slipped inside. They found the stairwell easily enough and went up all five flights to the top floor. It let them out behind the elevators and as they turned the corner, a security guard behind a desk called out, "Excuse me, Miss? Sir? This is a secure floor. Do you have visitor badges?"

April gasped in chagrin. "Oh, they signed us in downstairs, but I must have left them on the desk! Do we have to go all the way back down?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Drat!" April sighed dramatically, rolling her head back in exasperated defeat. She turned to the security guard with a harried smile that begged commiseration. "Our photo shoot with Eric Clark for CEO magazine was supposed to have started ten minutes ago, but traffic from the airport was an absolute *nightmare* . Can I quickly go check with his assistant about pushing back his next meeting while my photographer here gets his gear set up? I'll run right back down for the badges."

The guard, a young smooth-faced man with broad shoulders, considered her pleading smile then said, "Okay, but I can't let you stay up here without badges."

"Of course. I'll be right back." She motioned to Casey urgently and they rushed down the hall.

"How'd you get so good at this?" Casey whispered to her, impressed.

"Practice," she hissed back. It was true - she did have plenty of experience fabricating convincing stories, stories explaining why she'd missed work again, why her place sounded like a fraternity house, why her family never met her friends, and why her apartment building had burned down, just to name a few.

"I better keep an eye on you, you sneaky fox." He gave her bottom a smack.

"Not now," she said, indulgently. She saw a man filling a mug at the water cooler and went up to him. "Excuse me, I'm supposed to be picking up a courier package from Eric Clark's assistant. Can you remind me where she sits again?"

"Oh, all the way down the hall to the right," he said helpfully.

"Thanks. What's her name again?"

"Sandra."

"Oh yes, that's right. Thanks!"

Sandra, a curvy middle-aged brunette in stretchy-looking clothes, was in a phone conversation. April waited for her to finish, using the opportunity to look around. The very large office behind Sandra's cubicle must be that of her boss, Mr. Clark.

"Can I help you?" Sandra asked.

April flashed a winning smile. "Hi Sandra, is Eric in today?"

"Um, he's still at his meeting." She looked at April quizzically. "I'm sorry, you are...?"

"June Waters from CBS *60 Minutes* . I'd spoken to Eric about an interview later this week, but since he's in today, I was hoping we could do some background footage, you know, some shots of him sitting in his office, walking down the halls, that sort of thing. I'll really save time later, with editing."

Sandra's eyebrows knit together in bewilderment. "I don't have any media interviews on his calendar this week..." She turned to the schedule on the computer screen. "In fact, I'm sure he's declined all interview requests, as we've already issued a press statement." She turned back to April, suspicion creeping into her face. "How did you get up here? Did security let you through? Hey, wait- he's not allowed in there!"

Sandra jumped up from her desk and rushed, yelling, into her boss's office. Casey had pulled the news reporter's camera from the bag and was filming (or pretending to film, April wasn't even sure he knew how to operate the thing) a long tracking shot of the office.

April scooted behind Sandra's desk and pulled the postage stamp-sized wireless transmitter from her pocket. (It was amazing the things Donatello could get his hands on over the internet.) Her heart pounding, she turned it on and affixed it to the bottom of Sandra's telephone, then straightened up quickly, just in time to see a man in

a charcoal suit coming towards her, engrossed, thankfully, in a conversation with another man walking beside him, but his face recognizable to her immediately, from photos she'd pulled up in her research, as that of Eric Clark, CEO of Alliant Operations.

Not allowing herself any time to consider how much trouble she could be getting into, April snatched her voice recorder from her inside jacket pocket, flicked it on, and intercepted the six-foot-two, square-jawed, former Navy SEAL.

"Eric Clark, hi. June Waters from CBS. I left messages for you earlier which you haven't returned, so I was hoping to take a few minutes of your time now to ask you some questions about the allegations that Alliant has been complicit in performance drug abuse by its military contract personnel."

Mr. Clark took one look at April and her outstretched voice recorder and strode past with a grimace of surprise and disdain. He caught sight of the scene in his office - his assistant yelling at Casey to turn off his camera while he steadfastly ignored her - and his grimace widened into one of anger. "Sandra," he called, "what are these people doing in my office?" He said to the astounded man walking with him, "Call security for me, will you?"

April followed Clark into his office, still talking as fast as she could. "Mr. Clark, how do you respond to speculation that Alliant actually procured these drugs for employee use?"

"Ridiculous. No comment whatsoever. Turn that camera off!" He put a hand up to the lens that Casey turned on him.

"Does the name Saito Doshida mean anything to you? How about Agete, the shadowy semi-criminal organization that Saito Doshida founded and that we suspect actually develops and manufactures these drugs?"

"Nothing at all. Now leave my office before I have you arrested."

Two security staff members were hurrying towards them. Casey walked out of the office and pointed the camera lens in their direction. One of the guards, the one April had lied to earlier, grabbed the camera off Casey's shoulder while the other tried to put him in an arm lock.

Even though she knew, rationally, that Casey could handle a fight just fine, that he hung out with Raphael for God's sake, she couldn't control her visceral reaction. *Oh Casey, be careful, be careful...* She edged her way backwards, her fingers slipping into her pocket and palming the other micro transmitter hidden there.

Casey twisted free and elbowed the nearest guard away, nearly knocking him into a desk. Both security men jumped him and started wrestling him to the ground, calling for support. Eric Clark and his secretary ran out of the office towards the mayhem.

April reached for the phone on the desk and attached the bug to the bottom, cursing her quivering fingers. No one was paying attention to her; Casey was putting on quite a show, thrashing about on the floor and requiring four men to hold him down. She set the phone back down and rushed out of the room. "Okay, okay, we'll leave, just let him go," she yelled at the security people. Casey gave a couple more good thrashes for theatrical affect, then let himself be dragged to his feet. April managed to get one last word in: "So for the record, Mr. Clark, you deny any ties to drug-supplying organizations like Agete?"

"Get these people out of here," Clark yelled over his shoulder as he walked away.

The camera and voice recorder were confiscated, no surprise, and they were both escorted, rather roughly, from the building. April felt as though she couldn't get her heart rate to come down; she was nauseous and giddy from all the adrenalin. As they were thrust out on the sidewalk, Casey grinned at her. He had a bruised cheek, the collar of his shirt was torn, and his hair was messed up. "April, baby,"

he said, "that might be the most fun we've ever had together out of bed."

April snorted at him in disgust, then took his hand as they ran back to the waiting van.

"Sandra, set up a meeting with Saito Doshida."

"Your calendar is full this week, do you want me to make it next Tuesday?"

"No, move something. Get him in here as soon as you can."

Donatello pulled the headphones off his head. "Checkmate."

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

When they came for him, he was kneeling in the center of the room, eyes closed, trying with only mild success to meditate. He had done his best to keep up a daily training regimen within the confines of the small space, and that had helped to keep his mind and body occupied. However, as these past several hours had crept past, it had become increasingly difficult, and now nearly impossible, for Leonardo to keep his anxiety in check.

Ten days had passed; Kan's ultimatum to Raphael expired at the end of the night. Leo felt as though he were watching a roulette wheel spin, the little ball going around and around, daring anyone to guess where it would land. His brothers might show up with Doshida. They might show up without him. They might not show up at all. At this moment, they might be dead, injured, fighting, or planning an attack or a rescue mission. Within hours, his own life would be forfeit and he might die without ever knowing.

It was enough to make him want to take the Raphael-like step of smashing through the fragile-looking screen door, dispatching the two guards and fighting his way up through the layers of the building and the hordes of Foot soldiers. Pesky logic, however, told him that it would be tragic irony of epic proportions for his family to arrive only to find him already dead.

So he waited. When he heard the screen door slide open, he opened his eyes to see four Foot ninja - the two current guards and two other, higher ranked soldiers - looking down at him coldly.

" *Tachiagaru* . Stand up. Kan- *Jonin* wishes to speak to you."

The guards formed a rectangle around him, two in front, two behind, as they escorted him out of the room and down the narrow corridor.

At the end of the hall they climbed a set of steps, crossed a training hall, and ascended two more sets of steep stairs. He was wondering where they taking the trouble of bringing him, and why, when one of the forward guards rapped on a door and opened it, bowing in the entryway before stepping aside for Leonardo to enter.

They must be on the topmost floor of the main building, in a central room overlooking the entire courtyard, the main gate, and the gravel area beyond it. Kan Masataro stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking out the window at the view. He turned, black silk kimono against streaked red evening sky. "Your brother appears to have failed to fulfill his side of our agreement," Kan said.

"There's still time."

"Yes, a few hours," Kan agreed. "Which is why I wish to discuss matters with you now. Have you decided how you will concede?"

Kan was referring, of course, to his choice of execution or seppuku. No doubt the latter would be more convenient and less costly for the Foot. Firmly, Leonardo said, "I have not been defeated disgracefully and have no dishonor to atone for."

"I thought you would say that," Kan replied. "Which leaves me with a dilemma." Hands still behind his back, he turned halfway, his profile against the window, so he could see outside as he continued to speak to his captive, slowly, thoughtfully. "No doubt your family, if they are at all able, will return here regardless, in an attempt to free you if you are alive, or to retrieve your body and exact vengeance if you are dead. And while they cannot possibly succeed on such a courageous but foolhardy mission, I will soon have a formidable battle on my hands, one that will no doubt result in losses, which I wish to avoid.

"So I can think of only one tactically sound solution." He pointed to a rise in the path just outside the gates of the Foot compound. "After you are executed tonight, your body will be displayed outside the gates, along that exposed rise, visible upon approach to the

compound. Your brothers will see it, abandon any attempt to breach the walls, and instead concentrate on recovering your corpse. In that vulnerable position, the snipers positioned there, there, and there," he pointed along the wall and to the treed areas along the path, "should be able to dispatch them with minimal casualties."

The room seemed to be tilting. Leonardo felt ill. Kan's well-considered rationale and strategy, so calmly explained, was one that any ninja leader worth his salt could not help but appreciate, and he easily envisioned the whole thing playing out just as the man described. He felt a quaver in his voice and forced it as flat as paper. "Why are you telling me this?"

Kan turned to face him, without malice or sympathy. "I still have you to contend with. I do not doubt your ability to fight admirably until your last breath, and I've no desire to lose soldiers in a messy and drawn-out spectacle. Reconsider your position- seppuku, or unresisted execution, if you prefer. In exchange, I will reposition the snipers to defend the gate and walls, instructing them to show themselves but not to fire. Your brothers will be able to withdraw, to give you funeral rites, to live- if they so choose."

This was surely a bad dream. In a monotone, "I won't be alive to see you make good on that promise."

" *Jonin* to *jonin* - I will honor your wish to see your clan survive. If they attack from such an obviously compromised position, the compound can be defended without killing them." Kan paused. "I can see that you need time to consider your decision. I will give you two hours."

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Casey had put up a fuss about them taking his van without him. "Who got into that building in the first place, eh?" he'd fumed as Don had climbed into the driver's seat and revved up the ancient engine. "You don't want my help now, huh? This a mutant ninjas-only thing?"

"Something like that," Raph had muttered. "Look Casey, if we don't pull this off, there's no telling how bad this night will get. Don't be breaking April's heart now." He'd followed Mike into the back and pulled the door shut as Don had backed out past their speechless friend.

Several miles away and two hours later, the air inside the parked van had become warm, dark, and stale, gradually absorbing stress from the vehicle's occupants, until the tiny space fairly vibrated with pent-up anxiety.

"Last meeting of the day," Don reminded them, scrunched down under his hat in the front seat. "He'll show."

Raphael held his hand out for the binoculars, propped them over the back of the passenger side headrest and for the third time in the past two minutes, scanned the street leading up to the inconspicuous offices of Alliant Operations. No matter what, he told himself, in a few hours they were driving this van to the Foot compound. They were out of time.

"Most everyone's gone," he said. "We should get in place."

"How about her?" Don asked.

Tami sat on the floor in the back of the van, knees drawn up to chest, hands still bound. She had an air of resignation about her.

"We keep her until we have Doshida," Raph said. "Can't risk her warning him."

"Then one of us needs to stay here."

After an awkward beat, Mike said, "I'll stay." He looked up into Raphael's momentarily hesitant face. "That is, if you trust me."

Raphael nodded. He looked as though he would say more, but Don called out from the front seat, "Houston, the eagle has landed."

Raphael shoved himself forward into the space between the two front seats, fixing keen eyes on the grey sedan that had just pulled up to the curb. Two men got out of the car and waited while a third, slimmer man climbed out of the back seat. Raph grabbed the binoculars and jammed them against his eyes, seeing nothing but a blur of color for a couple seconds, until he oriented the view and found what he was looking for: Saito Doshida and his two bodyguards, walking into the front entrance.

He leapt to open the door. "You and me, Donny-boy. Let's do this."

At the tail end of rush hour, the streets were a little too populated for comfort, with people scurrying to cars, buses or subway stops. They picked their way down the gentle slope of the avenue, cutting behind buildings and obstacles, intuitively falling into pace with each other as they made adjustments to their approach.

"You better be damn sure of this," Raphael whispered as they ran.

"Just get Doshida. Let me worry about his bodyguards."

"What if your plan doesn't work?"

"Then we're screwed."

A hundred yards from the building, they broke apart, Donatello striking for the front entrance, Raphael circling around to the rear.

The van suddenly felt like a jail cell. Michelangelo gave a long, loud exhalation and slid down to the floor, dropping his head to his hands. *They know what they're doing, they'll be okay,* he told himself. "It'll be over soon," he said, meaning to reassure, but realizing too late that Tami might take it as a gloat.

Her eyes had shot daggers of hate at all of them when they'd led her out to the van and she'd realized that they were on their way to intercept Doshida. But over the last two hours a vacant, defeated look had come over her and now she merely laid her cheek down on her bent knee. "Please do something for me," she said quietly and with calm sincerity. "If you turn Saito over to the Foot, send me with him."

Mike shook his head, sickened by the implication of her request. "It's not you they want. You can go free."

"To where?"

"Anywhere. Home. Back to the Rising Hand, if you want."

She spoke without lifting her head. "Saito *is* the Rising Hand. Where he goes, I'll follow."

A man leaving the building through the front doors tucked his access card into his coat pocket, leaving a corner of it visible. Donatello scrunched down into the collar of his coat, pulled his hat way down and bumped the man's shoulder with a muttered "Sorry!" before hurrying off with the card cupped in his palm and the man's irritated glare glancing off his back.

He used the card to get through the front entrance, then crossed the lobby and used it again to get into the secured office area. He didn't

pause; he'd committed everything April and Casey had told him about the building layout to memory. He shed his coat and hat as he hurried up the stairs; he would need as much fighting mobility as possible. Clear sailing so far. Most people had gone home already.

Peeking around the corner of the fifth floor stairwell exit, he saw the security guard at his desk, doing a crossword puzzle. Don banged his bo loudly against the stairway railing, then took the steps three at a time to the landing of the roof.

Come on, what's taking you so long?

The stairwell door opened. The guard looked around for the source of the noise, first down the stairs to the fourth floor, then up, just in time to catch a glimpse of Donatello as he dropped from above, but far too late to react before the turtle landed behind him and rendered him unconscious with a solid, well-placed blow to the base of the head.

Once he was behind the security guard's desk, Donatello ran his eyes down the banks of switches and monitors. Given an hour or so to study them, he was sure he could figure out what they all did, but he didn't have that luxury. He toggled everything off - cameras, alarms, and door locks - and cut every wire under the desk.

At the sound of footsteps he ducked out of sight as two late-working employees walked past. When the closing elevator doors cut off their voices, he dropped low and hurried down the hallway, stopping just before it ended in a right-hand turn. A quick glance around the corner told him that Doshida's two bodyguards, the one with the goatee and the other, with the crooked nose, were standing, stiffly alert but bored-looking, outside the closed door of the large corner office.

Donatello retreated back down the hall. The smoke bomb he dashed against the floor sent up a dense grey cloud that mushroomed quickly before thinning and spreading out across the desks and computer stations, fogging the florescent lights and eliciting shocked exclamations from the few people still on the floor.

One of Doshida's guards said, "What on earth was that?"

Within two minutes, the floor had emptied of frightened stragglers. Donatello backed his way slowly through the smoke, watching unseen as the two men, handguns drawn, advanced cautiously in his direction.

The window ledge was not wide. Crouched on the balls of his feet with a sheer five-story drop beneath him, Raphael edged his way around the side of the building to the lit window in the northeast corner, stopping as soon as he could see inside.

Saito Doshida looked unchanged: well-dressed, poised, wearing a thin smile that didn't reach his eyes. He was sitting, legs crossed, listening with apparent patience to the man sitting across the desk from him. This larger man, who Raphael presumed was Eric Clark, was swiveled sideways, an elbow on the table, his fingers tapping the surface in agitation as he spoke. By chance, because of the way they were sitting, Raphael could see both their faces and lip-read part of the conversation.

"There were reporters here, asking questions. They asked about you- they used your name, my friend." Clark leaned in. "Now how is that possible? There are no records in our system that would give them ideas."

"I don't know how the press could have drawn a connection," Doshida agreed.

"But someone did. I'm getting heat, Saito. Major heat. We're going to have to pull the plug. Now, before anyone starts coming down with reviews and investigations and whatnot."

Raphael remained coiled but immobile, fingers and toes clutching the ledge like the claws of a gargoyle, one that had been artfully crafted to capture in stone the instant before flight. It was torturous, to be so close, and wait. But he had to give Donatello time.

"Perhaps we could continue the program on a reduced scale," Saito replied. "I've already invested a considerable amount into development and manufacturing, and as I've explained, the next version of the compound will be considerably improved."

"Yes, I know. And I was impressed by the results of the pilot program at our training center in Virginia. But unfortunately, I can't take any risks right now."

"You realize that I will have to seek out other partners."

"I do. But my entire business is at stake. I hope you understand." Clark extended his hand in a gesture of finality.

Saito looked at the outstretched hand. Tersely, he shook it. "Of course I understand."

So far so good. Don was in, Raph was out of sight. Michelangelo lowered the binoculars, wiping off the smudges his clammy palms had left on the black plastic. He was far more nervous out here than he would be if he was in there with them.

"Tell me something, now that it doesn't matter anymore," he said to Tami. "Where has he been? All those days that we were hunting for him, where was he?"

Tami sighed, acknowledging sadly the pointlessness of her earlier defiance. "Mexico City, Tokyo, and Moscow... I'm sure he cut his travels short when he got the call from Clark."

"So that guy we caught was right," Mike mumbled to himself. He shook his head, chagrined and amazed by all those long hours he and Raphael had spent combing the city under the assumption that Doshida was hunkered down in some backup safe house.

"What about the rest of Agete?"

"Broken up into a network of squad team cells that keep in contact virtually, at least until the training and office buildings are repaired and the security upgraded." She saw his begrudging admiration and her lips twisted in bitter irony. "And you're going to hand victory to that archaic feudal street gang. I don't suppose that matters to you, does it?"

Still in the same clothes she'd been captured in, blue hair falling into sad eyes, that last line delivered with flat accusation, she looked and sounded so betrayed that a lump rose to Mike's throat. He was usually good with words - words could bring comfort, hope, reassurance- but he could offer her none of that. The one thing they had in common- devotion to clan- was an impassable gulf separating his side of the van from hers.

So he told her the truth. "Tami, no ninja clan has ever been kind to my family. We're too much of a threat." He turned away from her. "I just want my brother back."

That's it... closer, closer...

With the first man, he had the advantage of cover and surprise. His bo, sweeping low through the smoky haze, caught the bodyguard's legs in mid-step and upended him. It spun back around and knocked the falling gun away with the precision of a baseball bat hitting a curve ball, before whistling down towards the crook between neck and collarbone.

Donatello was amazed, even though he'd expected to be. His opponent - the one with the crooked nose - rolled to his knees and caught the staff in mid-air, an inch before it made impact, and was up on his feet in an instant. Immediately and counter-intuitively, Don dropped his weapon and tackled the man, sending them both crashing into the wall.

A gunshot rang out; there was the sound of a computer monitor shattering. "Don't shoot at me, you moron!" the first man shouted,

locked in a fierce grapple with Donatello, who pressed in closer with an immobilizing arm lock. "Just get him off me!"

Don torqued the elbow and shoulder in opposite directions and was rewarded with a popping sound and the arm going limp. With a howl, the man knocked him back with a blow from his other elbow, just as his partner's long arms locked around the turtle's chest, the shockingly strong grip dragging him backwards. Don's mind raced; close quarters grappling was not the way he preferred to fight, and he would have only have one shot at this.

"There's only one of them!" exclaimed the goateed man from behind him.

The first man grabbed his dislocated limb and shoved it violently back into place with an angry grunt. His eyelids narrowed over blood red-rimmed pupils as he jammed his hands into a pair of brass knuckles. "Hold him," he snarled.

Don braced himself for the blow, but it still felt, as he doubled over, riding out the wave of white pain, as though the man's fist had entered his body. He took a second blow, and a third. Despite having known what he would be up against, some part of him that wasn't lighting on fire was still detachedly impressed.

"Feels like hitting a corkboard," said the man, cocking his fist again.

"Get my gun out and finish it off already, won't you?"

From somewhere on the other side of the building, there was a muffled bang, and the sound of glass shattering.

"What was that?" Both men paused.

Donatello went completely limp. His breathe burned; his plastron was dented like a piece of drywall that had had lines of marbles shot at it. The restraining arms shifted, trying to maintain their grip on his dead weight as the other man leaned forward.

Now.

His arms shot downwards, hands crossing and going for the knife and shuriken holsters of his belt, and then snapping back up in two hammer fist strikes; one hit the man with the brass knuckles in the spot between pectoral and armpit, the other drove straight back into the second man's thigh. Donatello's thumbs slammed all the way down on the backs of the three syringes he held in each fist.

The first of Saito's bodyguards frowned in confusion, and then slowly, alarm. He curled his grip around the gun he'd been reaching for, bringing it up to chest level, but then wobbled and fell, first to his knees, then tipping over oddly slow and stiff, like a cardboard cutout. Don felt the arms that been encircling him fall away as the man behind him also thudded to the ground. Forearm pressed to his wounded torso, Donatello straightened up and stepped away as the bodies on the floor began to twitch violently.

He couldn't afford to wait a second longer. With swift, certain movements, Raphael unhooked his grappling line and threw it up, over the edge of the roof, his left hand testing it for a tight snag, his right hand popping the top off the small plastic film canister that Donatello had filled with his most potent homemade explosive putty. He dug out the doughy black material, pressed it against the window, jammed in the fuse and held a lighter to the end. Two flicks to get a flame and two seconds for it to catch. Hand over hand, he went up his grappling line, bracing against the side of the building.

From somewhere inside, he heard a gunshot.

He kept moving, not allowing himself time to fear the worst. As he climbed up past ceiling height, he caught a glimpse of Doshida and Clark standing up in alarm, looking over at the closed office door. At the edge of the roof, he paused, hanging onto his line, legs drawn up and feet pressed against concrete, counting time in his head.

Right about... now.

The explosion, as sharp as a Fourth of July firework, and about four times louder, vibrated through the soles of his feet. He glanced down to see glittering shards of glass falling like so many icicles to the pavement below. He heard, clear as a bell, Eric Clark scream, "Jesus Christ!"

Raphael pushed off with all the force in his legs. He flew backwards through space, freefalling for a calculated heartbeat before gripping his line and piking his legs, feeling the rope go taut in his hands as it swung him back towards the building, his heels aiming for the large jagged opening in the office window. The interior- off-white walls, steel grey carpet, heavy-looking wood furniture- rushed towards him, too quickly for him to think about the terrifying level of precision he needed to execute, and then he was through, letting go before he felt the line reach the end of its pendulum swing, his body suddenly dropping, landing in an impact-absorbing crouch and roll.

The now very large and close figure of Eric Clark dove for the lowest drawer of his desk, yanking it open and clawing the bottom, his hand closing around his gun just before Raphael slammed the side of his head against solid mahogany, rendering him senseless. He plucked the weapon from the man's limp hand and tossed it through the dark space where the window had been.

"Raphael." Saito Doshida said the name slowly, with wonder. He walked backwards, eyes flicking expectantly towards the office door. "Cam! Mick!"

"They're not coming."

Saito swallowed, his Adam's apple moving up and down against his crisp white shirt collar. "You are so very...predictably tenacious."

"Let's see... you poisoned me, used my brothers, planned to kill us to save your drug business, and finally sold us out to the Foot." Raphael stalked towards him, eyes unwavering. "Did you think I wouldn't come for you?"

"I also got you the medicines you needed, offered your family an alliance, and ultimately did what you wanted - decimated the Foot and made it obsolete." He put his hands to his chest in a gesture of sincerity. "Surely, we can reach some... understanding."

"I don't think so."

Raphael moved faster than Saito's hand, traversing the space between them in a bound and dashing away the small pistol that appeared from inside the man's suit jacket pocket. He punched Doshida in the jaw, watched him stagger back wide-eyed with a hand to his face, then hefted him by the lapels and threw him into the wall, where he knocked down a framed painting before tumbling unconscious to the carpet.

Donatello stood in the open office doorway, leaning heavily against the frame, taking in the destroyed office and the unconscious bodies. "Nice work," he commented.

"Damn," Raphael said, looking down at Doshida. "That felt good."

Mike careened the van right up to the building, slammed it into park and left the engine running as he threw open the rear doors. Raph and Don climbed in, hauling the prone form of Saito Doshida in with them.

"You did it," Mike breathed.

Tami took one look and gave a raw, high-pitched gasp before bringing her hands up to her face.

"Step on it," Raph said. "We haven't got all night."

Mike drove five blocks, then pulled over to the curb.

"Why are we stopping?" Raphael demanded.

Mike got into the back of the van and knelt in front of Tami's miserable form. Drawing a dagger, he cut the ropes off her wrists and ankles. He opened the back door onto a quiet, tree-lined street, letting in orange streetlight and a warm breeze. "We're not stopping again until we reach the Foot compound, Tami. This is your only chance." He closed his eyes for a moment; he didn't want to stoop to pleading, not in front of his waiting, watching brothers. "Please take it," he said softly.

She didn't look at him as she crawled over and rested her freed hands on Saito's chest, her head bowed, body curled over him protectively.

Mike said hoarsely, "Tami..."

"Let her be, Mike," Raphael said, his voice strangely, unexpectedly, devoid of anger or impatience. "Don't make her leave him."

Mike's hand tightened on the door handle. He pulled it closed and the inside of the van went dark again. This time when he hit the gas pedal, he didn't let up.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

Leonardo was no stranger to the sensation of warped time. In battle, a moment could happen in slow motion; in meditation, half an hour might disappear. The last two hours had been a strange amalgam, wherein each minute passed excruciatingly slowly, but then, suddenly, time was up.

He was led out into the courtyard by the same four guards. It had been so many days since he had been outside that the air seemed especially cool and crisp, the light nuanced and beautiful, the distant city sounds like birdsong.

He would not have long to enjoy it.

Kan and about a dozen of his most senior soldiers were waiting. Many more Foot were standing some distance away, eager spectators respecting some invisible arena fence. One of Kan's men stepped forward with a black lacquer tray, upon which lay a wickedly sharp, long dagger.

He looked down at the tray- the promise of a relatively quick death and mercy for his family, being served to him like cold tea. He found himself wondering just how difficult it would be to cut through his own plastron. Would it be better to draw the blade through the flexible groove between the lower plates, or to employ the acceptable alternative of opening an artery in his neck?

Slowly, he raised his eyes to meet Kan's. "No."

It wasn't that he was afraid, or that he didn't want, more than anything, to save his family. It was imagining them here, watching, as horrified and betrayed as he would be in their place. Raphael

screaming at him in the eternity of the afterlife, if any existed: *How could you? Die like a sheep without putting up a fight?*

They lived every day knowing they might see each other killed in battle; that they could handle. This they could not.

Kan's expression hardened into a mask. "As you wish." He motioned away the tray and four Foot ninja advanced, drawing weapons. It seemed like overkill for the execution of one unarmed offender, but clearly the *jonin* was taking no chances.

This, Leonardo promised Kan with his eyes, *won't be over quickly.*

He thought of his father, and his brothers, and then, nothing but quiet readiness.

A shout rose up from somewhere near the gate. Kan halted his men with a hand as a junior sentry came running up, nearly tripping over himself as tried to stop, bow, and speak at the same time. " *Kan-jonin. Karera wa kokodesu. San'nin wa kochira* ."

They are here. The other three are here.

And then, Raphael's voice, the loud, angry timbre like sweet music to Leonardo's ears, carrying above the heads of the assembled ninja. " *Where is he?"*

Kan turned and strode towards the gate, motioning for it to be opened. The Foot soldiers parted, falling back to either side, until Leonardo could see across the length of the courtyard to where his brothers stood in the entryway.

As Kan approached, Raphael said, almost too quietly to be heard, but his mouth visibly forming the words, "God help you if-"

Michelangelo saw over Kan's shoulder and grasped Raphael's arm. He and Donatello followed Mike's gaze, and all three of their faces

filled with such naked relief that Leonardo felt the great wave of it roll over him, crashing on top of his own.

Without taking his eyes off Leo, Raphael stepped to one side and prodded forward the figure of Saito Doshida. There was a sharp hiss of breath from many mouths, and the murmur of voices, until Kan held up a hand for silence. The Foot leader stopped in front of the three turtles and their captive. Leonardo could only see Kan's back, but he heard his words.

"So. You were successful, after all."

"Surprised?" Raphael drew the word out with a sneer.

Saito Doshida looked almost shrunken, his jaw swollen, his badly rumpled navy blue suit and pinstripe tie ridiculously out of place in a courtyard full of black-garbed ninja. Standing right behind him was a woman Leo had seen before and recognized as Saito's lieutenant, Tami.

Kan took a step forward and Raphael said, "Not so fast." He darted his eyes back to Leo, who walked across the courtyard, the Foot turning their heads to watch him, but none stopping him, until he passed Kan and stood next to Donatello, who reached up and gripped tightly the top rim of his shell, as if confirm he was really there and to hold him in place.

"My katana," Leo requested.

At a word from Kan, a Foot soldier hurried off.

Saito Doshida watched all this with what appeared to be mild interest. Now he bowed deeply and said, " *Kan Masataro, Jonin-san. Watashi wa anata no jihi de gozen* ." It appears I am in your mercy. "Although," he glanced at the turtles and continued in Japanese, "I am surprised to find the Foot relying on their old enemies to do what they cannot."

Kan did not return the bow but narrowed his eyes in disdain. " *Uragirimono."* Traitor. " *Inu.* " Dog. "You will finally account for betraying your family and clan."

Doshida's face twitched, betraying, for a moment, emotion that seemed foreign to it. Real fear. A tremble entered his voice as he dropped his gaze to the stones beneath his feet. "As you well know, *Jonin-san,* I do not have the fortitude for seppuku. I ask only, in the presence of these witnesses, for a swift and immediate death."

Behind him, Tami gave a small suppressed sob.

"That would be more than you deserve."

"I humbly ask you to consider the otherwise long and honorable Foot Clan lineage of the Doshida family, of which I am the only descendant son."

The Foot soldier that Kan had sent away returned with Leonardo's katana and scabbards. He handed them over hesitatingly and Leonardo strapped them on in seconds.

"Let's get outta here," Raphael said, taking several steps backwards, pulling Don and Leo with him, but none of them managing to go any further, as riveted by the scene before them as everyone else in the courtyard. Mike stayed rooted in place, unable to tear his eyes from Tami and Doshida.

"So be it," Kan said. The surrounding Foot Soldiers hastily cleared a space around their leader and Doshida.

Saito was turning a nauseous shade of yellow. "Please... just a couple minutes..." Slowly, carefully, as though trying to draw out every last remaining second available to him, he took off his suit jacket, folded it and set it down on the ground. He removed his gold cufflinks and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. He loosened his tie and took it off, then unbuttoned the stiff collar, pulling it down to expose his neck.

Tami was weeping silently now. Doshida said, "Goodbye Tami," in a voice that might have been regretful, or tender, or nothing at all. Then he stepped forward and lowered himself to his knees.

Mike reached out a hand to stop her, but Tami stumbled towards Saito and dropped down next to him, asking to share his fate.

"No," Mike whispered. Raphael put an arm out to keep him from interfering, but there was no need. Mike didn't move at all, as if he couldn't.

Kan drew his sword, and perhaps it was the glint of the blade's edge, or the rasp of it leaving its scabbard, but Doshida lost his nerve completely. He fell forward onto his stomach, hands extended. "Please *Jonin-san* , *jihi o kakeru* !" To everyone's shock, he crawled forward and grasped Kan's feet. "Show mercy!"

The Foot leader pulled his feet away, his mouth twisted in a grimace of deepest disgust. "Sit up! You humiliate yourself!" He raised his katana.

The blade never came down. Poised at the apex of its swing, it froze, locked in place by hands, arms, a body and legs that suddenly belonged not to Kan Masataro, but to some statue in his perfect likeness.

Saito Doshida was the only one who moved. He stood up, and before anyone could put two thoughts together, he plucked the sword from Kan's immobile fingers and laid the flat of the blade on the man's shoulder, edge against his neck. "Who is humiliated now, Kan?" Then in a loud voice, "Foot ninja! Whichever one of you that moves will be responsible for the death of your *jonin!* "

Raphael formed each word separately: "What the hell?"

"His cufflinks," Donatello breathed.

Leonardo followed Don's gaze down to Kan's feet. Two gold buttons glinted from above the rim of the man's black *tabi* shoes, the hidden needles pinned through the fabric and into the flesh of the pressure point behind his ankles.

"The neurotoxin won't kill you, Kan," Doshida said amiably. "That would be letting you off the hook too easily, don't you think? Your paralysis is temporary- you'll be quite free to cut your own belly within an hour." Although his body remained comically immobilized in the posture of gripping a katana hilt that was no longer in his hands, the Foot leader's eyes ignited with fury and hatred. Unperturbed, and without shifting his hold on the sword against Kan's neck, Doshida pulled a cell phone from his pants pocket and handed it back to Tami, who overcame her awestruck gaping enough to take it and start punching in a number.

Raphael blinked hard, unable to believe what he was seeing, then snapped a look over to Leonardo, who read his thoughts in an instant. *We can take them both out.*

"Listen first," Saito called out, as if he'd also just heard Raphael's thoughts, though he addressed the indecisively shifting Foot Soldiers. "Tonight, I will leave New York for good. And I will take any of you who wish to join me." He let the first murmur of surprise, indignation and confusion ripple through the ranks before raising his voice above it. "I was once a Foot Solider like you. But all this-" he swept out his arm, "belongs in the past! There is a future, for people like us, for ninja." He turned his head, including the turtles as he spoke now. "I'm done with squabbles over street territory, with laws and press scrutiny, with pointless clan vendettas. There's more money to be made elsewhere- not just in this country, but South America, Eastern Europe- places with great untapped demand for ninja skills. Wherever there's intrigue and violence, there will be work for us. Have your city then. Or-" and his challenge traveled across the crowd, "come with me."

No one moved. Then one Foot Soldier stepped forward, approaching Doshida with a short bow. He pulled off his mask, revealing the face

of a young man, no older than twenty-five. Another followed him, and another, until there were over half a dozen black-clad young men standing next to the *jonin* of the Rising Hand, in his partly unbuttoned white dress shirt and navy pants. The remaining Foot Clan stared at them, and then one whispered word rose up, taken up by row after row of Foot, echoing like a chanted curse: t *raitors.*

All his brothers' eyes were on him. They were four strong; they could get through Doshida's small, new retinue and cut him down, and then Kan as well, defenseless as a wax sculpture, before they were set upon by Foot. Leonardo felt the courtyard pulse with the promise of bloodshed. Outside the gate, there was the sudden squealing of many tires on gravel.

"We leave. Now."

Both Michelangelo and Raphael hesitated, but when Leo and Don fell back into position, the force of ingrained training moved them. They broke into flanking pairs, retreating through the entryway of the compound, aiming for cover on either side, just as the doors of two black SUVs swung open in full view of the Foot courtyard, a contingent of men with handguns and rifles piling out of the vehicles before they had even stopped moving.

"We're going. No one move!" Doshida declared, his voice carrying all the way out to the turtles as they sped through the trees, across the grounds, converging again as a group of four, well away from the compound. Looking back, they could see, from a distance, Doshida and Tami and their new recruits, walking out of the gates and to the cars, their armed men backing up behind them, keeping their sights trained on the Foot. Michelangelo's eyes followed the spot of blue hair as it disappeared through a car door, they stayed on the SUV as it roared back down the path, into the street, and away, and finally, they dropped to the ground, closing briefly as he sighed, nodding.

Raphael said, "You think you made the right call?"

Leonardo looked back at the compound, then out at the glitter of the city. "It's not our war," he said. "We already won back our clan." He reached for them, and his brothers pulled him into a fierce embrace.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

There was a half-packed suitcase lying open on the sofa. Holly smiled, more easily than April had seen before. "I'm going to stay with my mom in North Carolina for a while. I just need to get away for a bit, you know?"

April nodded. "You deserve it. It's been a rough few weeks. You did great, by the way." The media attention on Holly had died down relatively quickly, shifting now to the pending special investigations and the civil suit that the families of the dead Alliant employees had brought against the company. The apartment that had been, for almost two weeks, a base camp for Holly's mutant protectors had been cleared out, the For Rent sign reinstalled in the window, awaiting some future tenant who would surely question why the carpet and counters were so dirty.

April said, "Take care of yourself."

They embraced, warmly, if a little hesitatingly, bound and divided by secrets. "Thank you," Holly whispered.

As they stepped apart, Holly said, "You know, the evening that the fire alarm went off in the subway station..." She pressed her lips together, torn about whether to go to this place that had become a no-man's-land between them. "I thought I saw something. Someone running. It was all so confusing, and my eyes might have been playing tricks on me..."

April was silent, watching her expectantly.

Holly's next words hovered somewhere between a question and statement. "These people, your friends... they don't hide because they want to, but because they have to...am I right?"

The front door opened and a man, tanned and youthful-looking for being middle-aged, with a trim beard and hair the same reddish-brown as Holly's, stepped in, surprised to have caught the two women standing in silence. "Dad," Holly said quickly, "you remember April O'Neil- my journalist friend who's been helping me handle all the press."

"Oh yes, of course," Dr. Chambers said, compensating for his lapse with an especially cheerful smile. He shook April's hand. "Thank you for being here, for all your help."

"Thank *you* ," April said, without thinking. "For-"

For seeing them as I do. For saving them.

"For...handling all this...so well." She blushed at her awkward finish and composed herself by pulling on her jacket and purse with a lively step. "Another time, then." She turned to look behind her shoulder. "Goodbye, Holly."

Trellises of hanging ivy, dense, immaculately-trimmed high hedges and shadows cast by the drooping willow- there were plenty of ninja-friendly shadows in the garden. Michelangelo knew he would be undetectable to anyone who might glance in his direction. Almost anyone.

He wasn't sure who sensed who first. "You had to come see her too," he said.

Donatello shifted, melted into the darkness next to him. "I'm praying this is the very last time I'll ever have to come here," he said optimistically, but with a note in his voice, of something bittersweet.

In silence, they watched her move in and out of view, packing her suitcase, putting away the dishes, calling someone on the phone. It might have felt awkward, sharing this time as if they were two conspiring peeping toms, but oddly enough, it wasn't, and Mike felt

grateful for his brother's company. "What do you think she's like?" he asked. "Do you think she's anything like April?"

After a moment, Don said, "No one's anything like April."

Mike nodded. "Still," he said, and left it at that.

Holly Chambers opened her father's patio door and stood silhouetted in the house light, looking out into the garden. She took a deep breath, drawing in the scent of the flowering shrubs and the warm evening air of the city, as if packing a little bit of it away, as she had packed her other traveling essentials in her suitcase. She stepped out of the house and walked to the edge of the patio. Her eyes swept all around the dark garden, the stone wall, even the streetlight-lit sky above. "Are you here?" she called. More loudly, her voice steady, "I'm not afraid."

Though he remained motionless, Michelangelo felt a pang of something unnamed quicken his pulse. There she stood, on that porch, now scarred but not ruined, still a creature of light, of college parties and books, spiral staircases and chandeliers, internships, spring break, friends and work, softness, normalcy and ignorance. He didn't look at Donatello, knowing only from his utter stillness that his brother saw the same thing he did: how easy it would be, to irrevocably change this woman's life.

Go back, he thought. *Go back to the world you were born for, one where we don't exist.*

Holly called out to the darkness, "If you are out there... thank you."

At first, her words met with silence. Then some surprisingly loud frogs in a neighbor's backyard pond took up a chorus. The young woman sighed, shaking her head and rolling her eyes at her own foolishness as she stepped back into the warmth of the house. The patio door slid closed and her figure appeared in the window for a moment, then vanished as she drew the curtains.

Donatello said, with a wistful but contented sigh, "Let's go home."

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

Donatello had gathered everything already, so all there was left for Raphael to do was assemble the three padded mailing envelopes. Into each one, he slipped a stapled copy of all the press coverage surrounding the Alliant story. On three blank pieces of paper he wrote: *Follow the trail to Saito Doshida, Agete Inc. (aka the Rising Hand)* and the address of Agete's office buildings. Lastly, he opened the small metal box with its four remaining filled syringes. He dropped one, along with his note, into each envelope and sealed them. One would go to the NYPD, one to the FBI, and one to the DEA. As a general rule, Raphael had exceedingly little confidence in law enforcement, but that was no reason to pass up doing one last thing to make life harder for Saito Doshida.

After all, the man would be out of his reach now, flying business class into the criminal stratosphere, while Raphael remained as he was, a creature of the city's pavement and shadows, its filthy alleys and rooftops and tunnels. That was fine with him; there were always Foot and other street brethren to contend with. With luck, he wouldn't be crossing paths with Saito Doshida again.

Then again, he could not always count on luck.

He rolled the last syringe in his fingers, then set it back in the box and closed the lid. He made some space for it in the back of a closet, behind some old training gear, tucked securely between a stack of Mike's childhood comics and a pile of Don's out-of-date reference books.

He passed the training room and looked in. Master Splinter knelt, holding his brush poised over parchment, then swept it elegantly across the paper in three sure strokes, black ink magically taking on

beauty and form. Next to him, Leonardo copied the strokes on his own paper and tilted his head at it critically, making a face.

"It is no different from sword work," Splinter said.

"I hope you're wrong, sensei. Otherwise, I have some katana practice waiting for me." He looked up. "Raph."

"Join us, Raphael. I have more paper and another brush."

Raph shook his head, and not just because calligraphy struck him a torturous way to spend time. "I was on my way out." As he turned to go, he noticed Leonardo eyeing the envelopes under his arm and paused. "Come, if you like."

Leonardo looked over at Splinter, who said, "Calligraphy can certainly wait for another day. Go on with your brother." Leo got to his feet.

"Sons." Splinter paused them just outside the doorway. He set down his brush and came up to them, placing a long-fingered hand on each of their arms.

"Sensei?" Leo asked, concerned by his sudden silence.

Splinter gave a gentle nod, closing his eyes briefly. "It is good to have you all home." He turned and walked back to his calligraphy. "Do not be gone too long."

"We won't, Master Splinter."

They wended their way through the tunnels, each of them appreciating, silently, how sorely they had missed the freedom and security of these dank, dark tubes in the days they had been away from them. After a while, they began to talk, adding to the bare explanations they had of what the other had been through.

"Did Kan really call us that?"

"Fiends of the underworld, is what he said."

"Huh." Raphael made a pleased face, the corner of his mouth curling up. "I like it."

"I knew you would. I thought of you right away."

Raph shot him a look, pretending not to see his brother's grin. "Pain-in-the-ass of the underworld suits you better."

They emerged just outside the post office and Raphael dropped the envelopes one by one into the mail slot. They climbed to the roof and sat on the edge. It was a comfortable, clear night, foreshadowing warm days ahead. Leonardo tilted his head back, contemplating the starless sky.

"What do you think will happen to the Foot?" Raph mused. "Will Kan still be *jonin,* after all this?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I suppose it depends on what he thinks is more important: continuing his work of strengthening the Foot Clan, or atoning for his defeat with his life." He thought about it for a minute. "I kind of hope he stays."

Raphael snorted. "He's trying to rebuild the Foot. *And* he held you prisoner."

"True, but he is an honorable man, after all. It could've been a lot worse."

Raphael looked over at his brother, the truth of Leo's words prodding an ache in his chest. He had never been good at putting feelings into words, and he could not do so now.

Leonardo said, "It drove me crazy though. Being in there, not knowing anything." He felt Raph's eyes on him and, impulsively, cupped a hand to the back of his brother's neck, pulling their heads together in brief, fierce understanding.

When he let go, Raphael blinked, shifted his face away. After half a minute of silence, said, "Nice night for a run."

"Where to?"

"Top of City Hall."

"You're on. Get ready to eat dust."

And they ran, each long stride, each rooftop leap, connecting them to what was theirs: the city, the night, the kinship of their clan.